



EXPEDITION COOKING

with the
**ENOCH
ROYAL
KNIGHTS**

1

Author: MASHIMESA EMOTO
Artist: TERA AKAI



Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Chapter 1: The Gift of Soup from the Forest](#)

[Chapter 2: A Giant Steamed Fish Wrapped in a Leaf](#)

[Chapter 3: The Capital's Famous White Scallion Rice Crackers](#)

[Chapter 4: Milk Stew with Leftovers](#)

[Chapter 5: Are Princesses Made of Sugar?](#)

[Chapter 6: A Battle for Caramel in the Ghost Town?!](#)

[Chapter 7: Surprise Hamburg Steak During Hunting Season](#)

[Side Story: The Many Struggles of Ulgus the Knight](#)

[Side Story: Garr, the Wolfman Enigma](#)

[Bonus Chapter: Expedition Cooking with Mell and Ulgus](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 1

Mashimesa Emoto

Translation by Emma Schumacker

Illustration by Tera Akai

Title Design by Arbash Mughal

Editing by Tom Speelman and Charis Messier Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 1

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Chapter 1: The Gift of Soup from the Forest

HOW *did my life turn out like this?*

A blood-drenched gang of bandits stood before me. Well...that's what it *felt* like, staring at the group of four knights.

We were currently in the deepest depths of the forest, hard at work hunting monsters. That was our unit's duty as the Second Expeditionary Squadron of the Enoch Royal Knights.

"Excellent work! Now what's our kill count?"

Captain Ludtink, the head bandit—*no, he's the Captain!*— and a giant man with a frightening bearded face, turned around to question Vice Captain Velrey.

"You're at twenty," Velrey replied. "I'm at seven, Garr's at eleven, and Ulgus has five."

"Ha! If we keep up this pace, we'll be done by tomorrow. Hey, Wild Rabbit! Jot those numbers down!"

With a big sigh, I noted the numbers in my monster extermination journal.

"Don't go slackin' on us now, Wild Rabbit!"

"I'm not a wild rabbit, Captain. I'm Mell. Mell Risurisu."

"Nah! You're a wild rabbit."

The captain poked my long ears with his finger.

"Gyah!" I cried. "Please don't do that!"

"Gahahaha!" he laughed heartily at my annoyed reaction.

What the heck do you think you're doing, you perverted bandit?! I wanted to shout at him, but I managed to hold it in. This man *was* (somehow) still my commanding officer, after all.

Still...he was truly insensitive! I was a Fore Elf and my unique, long ears were actually full of nerve endings that made them extremely sensitive.

We weren't born with these ears just so people could tease us about them. We had evolved them to inhabit the forests, letting us sense predators and monsters and discern different animal cries.

"If ya got long ears, then you're a rabbit."

"No, I am *not*! I'm a Fore Elf!"

I glared at him, but he didn't look scared at all. I felt so frustrated as Captain Ludtink patted me on the head before turning away.

I swore I'd have my revenge someday. Flames of fury quietly burned in my heart.

Now why, you ask, would a Fore Elf—a resident of the woods—join a royal knightly order? The answer was simple—my very large family was very, *very* poor.



JUST the other day, the man I was supposed to marry had told me we were through.

His reasoning? My family was terribly poor, my looks were lacking, and I couldn't use magic at all. And he was right!

Despite being a Fore Elf, one of the "beautiful spirits of the woods," I was hopelessly plain. I couldn't use a drop of magic. And I was absolutely no good at hunting.

Men were usually the ones in charge of hunting large beasts like boars, while women handled everything to do with smaller animals like rabbits and birds. But in my case, I'd spend a whole day hunting without killing a thing, instead filling my basket up with medicinal herbs before going back home.

With all these issues, I was the last person anyone would want as a bride.

Dirt poor, no life skills, and no magic to my name. Three huge detriments stacked atop each other. I was utterly hopeless.

Now, maybe I was just biased when it came to my family. But I had some very cute little sisters; they were wonderful hunters and powerful sorcerers.

My only wish was to save them from our crippling poverty. With that goal in mind, I ventured to the faraway human royal capital to get a job and send money back home.

I had really thought I'd be able to find work right away, since my best skills were cooking, laundry, and cleaning. But it became an unbelievable struggle! Apparently with humans, no aristocrats will offer you high-paying jobs working for them without a letter of recommendation first. Boy, was this news to me!

I had interviewed for jobs at various restaurants, but as soon as they saw my pointy ears, I was immediately shown the door.

Fortunately, a kindly old lady explained to me that most humans see elves as prideful creatures who aren't suited for work. Not that there's any truth to that!

Elves rarely ever show up where humans dwell, and the ones who do are eccentrics, so the prevailing human wisdom is that every elf is probably just a weirdo. I couldn't help but hate all the elves who'd left such a bad impression on those humans.

But the kind old lady found a job that she said would suit me. She introduced me to the Royal Order of Enoch, the national order of knights who swore their loyalty to the country.

They accepted all races into their ranks and allowed them to work as equals. And the salary was very impressive.

My spirits high, I'd gone to Enoch for an interview and to take their exam. I was *certain* they would offer me an office job of some kind, since math was my specialty.

But for some reason...for some *insane* reason...they had assigned me to the Second Expeditionary Squadron, which only had four other members to its name. And they had made me a combat medic! I had desperately tried to convince them that, despite being a Fore Elf, I couldn't use restoration magic at all. But once I'd mentioned I knew a bit about medicinal herbs, I ended up assigned to this absurd unit.

Expeditionary squadrons were deployed to different areas for things like monster extermination and disaster relief. The second I learned I'd have to ride

a horse for hours a day, I felt lightheaded.

Horseback riding definitely wasn't my strong suit, either. On top of that, the other members of my unit were all huge shocks to me.

Crow Ludtink, our Captain, was so tall that I had to crane my neck to look at him. His face was lined with an ash-gray beard, and his eyes were a dazzling purple with a crazy gleam to them. He really did resemble a bandit leader, with an enormous longsword strapped to his back. He didn't look like any knight I'd ever seen.

If someone had introduced him to me as a bandit, I would have said, "Yeah, that seems about right."

Anna Velrey, our unit's Vice Captain, was a young woman. She had blue eyes, short dark-blue hair, a slender build, and she fought with two swords in combat. Even to a newcomer like me, she was very friendly.

June Ulgus was a young man around my age, probably around seventeen or eighteen. He reminded me of this brown dog I used to have when I was younger.

Finally, there was Garr Garr, a rather quiet wolfman who was even bigger than Captain Ludtink. He had beautiful red fur, and despite being a typical masculine knight, he was also compassionate and gentle.

This motley crew had dragged me out on one of their expeditions without thinking to explain what our mission was!

Our destination was a forest about three hours away from the royal capital by horse. Our mission was to eliminate a large monster outbreak. Captain Bandit (as I kept calling Ludtink in my head but *never* to his face) had ordered me up on my horse and then handed me a brand-new helmet, which looked a lot more like a giant metal pot.

"Here! Wear this during battle and cower somewhere in the back, Wild Rabbit," he'd said.

"Huh?!"

Ludtink had pointed at my long ears and called me Wild Rabbit right from the

get-go. I immediately decided I'd never forgive him for that injustice!

His criminal-like appearance wasn't the only thing that surprised me about him. Captain Bandit was stronger than I ever imagined. He could cut through monsters with a single slash of his longsword. Vice Captain Velrey could slice through the monsters' throats with her dual blades, whirling through the air like a dancer.

Ulgus, the young knight, waited for just the right moment to send his arrows flying, piercing the monsters' skulls. And Garr, the wolfman, surprisingly nimble for such a large man, chose to deal with monsters by impaling them with a spear.

These four, I realized, were surely the best of the best. They were proven knights on the battlefield.

But once the fighting subsided and they'd turned to look at me, their bodies drenched in blood and gore, all I could see was a head bandit and his gang of ruffians. I kind of wished they would act more "knight-like," like building a cross to mark the monsters' remains or something.

I decided to pray to the gods for them all instead.

"Hey, Wild Rabbit. Get hopping already," Captain Bandit called out to me. I acknowledged his order with a cry back and started moving.

This is the story of how I became not a member of a bandit clan, but the Second Expeditionary Squadron of Enoch.



THE monster extermination ended up lasting until sundown. Our surroundings grew dark. The thick trees loomed around us, casting a spooky shadow over our group.

The others had told me that since it was dangerous to travel at night, we were going to set up camp instead. Of course, this was my very first time camping the human way.

I picked up some fallen sticks in the area, using them to light a campfire.

After seeing all that slaughter and all those corpses, I hadn't had it in me to

eat lunch. But my stomach started growling a while ago, so I figured I was ready for dinner.

“Here, Medic Risurisu.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Vice Captain Velrey handed me my rations—bread, dried meat, and a leather pouch full of water.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked softly.

“Ah, yes. I’m all right now.”

“Really? That’s good...”

I’m supposed to be the medic, and she’s worried about my health...

What I needed to do was regain my composure and focus on eating. I said a quick prayer, then it was time to dig in. I started with the dried meat.

...Okay. This is like chewing on a particularly old pair of leather boots!

It was also completely flavorless—like the meat’s actual taste had died long ago. I longed to ask this jerky-maker what he could’ve possibly done so wrong. When I looked up, I saw Captain Ludtink use his teeth to tear a chunk off, making a loud snap.

...Bandit. You’re a total bandit, I repeated in my head as I picked up the bread.

...It’s rock solid! We might as well have picked up pebbles on our way here!

And it was also sour—a total letdown in both texture and flavor. I didn’t even feel like I could eat it. *Who knew that bread could be so inedible?*

Once again, there was Captain Ludtink, crunching loudly on his own roll. *Who knew that regular bread could be so hard and crunchy?*

As I watched him chew, looking perfectly content, I wondered if he was also capable of eating stone tile.

And what was with this water? It tasted a bit strong, like it was seasoned with medicinal herbs or something. I wondered what the point of that could possibly be. But my body was refusing to swallow it like that...and worst of all...

“AAAARGH!!”

I collapsed and let out a scream. With my head in my hands, I kicked my legs up and down.

I was *starving!* There was food I wanted to eat, yet I couldn't eat it. I was so frustrated, all I could do was scream!

“Medic Risurisu? You okay there?” Ulgus peered down at me with concern.

“I...I'm not okay at all...”

The royal capital's preserved foods are disgusting! This simply won't do...!

As I rolled around on the ground in despair, my nose suddenly picked up a familiar scent.

“Hmm?”

Something nearby caught my eye.

“That herb! It's garlic!”

Garlic was a great ingredient for adding flavor to things like soup. It was strangely expensive to buy in a shop, so I always collected mine straight from the forest. I instantly decided to pick some now, bring them back to the knights' dormitory, and dry them to use later.

I ran over to where the garlic was, busying myself plucking bulbs of it, only to spot another wonderful ingredient nearby.

“Ah! Black pepper mushrooms!” I cried.

These were mushrooms that tasted just like regular black pepper. They were delicious when eaten grilled, even with no other seasoning.

I wanted to shovel them into my mouth. But black pepper mushrooms were very spicy on their own, so we usually ate them with bread or something more filling.

They'd be perfect for soup...but I didn't exactly have any cookware with me.

Spicy mushrooms, rubber jerky, and hard stones—er, I mean bread. It was the saddest line-up of ingredients imaginable.

Again, I was in agony.

“Hey. Wild Rabbit. If it’s too hard to eat, then just let it boil for a bit,” Captain Ludtink said bluntly.

“Ah!!” I cried.

His simple suggestion instantly sparked inspiration in me.

I went to my horse and retrieved that large, pot-like helmet I’d been given. I poured my bitter water into it and saw that it held the liquid well. After a brief washing, since it was a brand-new helmet, I placed it atop the bonfire to boil the water and kill any germs.

“What’re you up to, Wild Rabbit?”

When Captain Ludtink questioned me, I responded eagerly.

“I’m going to make soup!”

His suggestion of boiling the hard bread and stiff jerky to soften them had given me the idea! I poured the boiling water out of my helmet and added more from my waterskin.

Next, I took out my knife and started to cut the bread and jerky into bite-sized pieces. But...

“Grrrr... GRAAAAH!!”

It was too stiff to cut through. I was even using the sharpest knife I owned, which I’d brought from home. *Is it really a rock?!*

“Here. Gimme that.” Captain Ludtink’s bulky hand reached out next to me and plucked the knife from my hands.

All it took was a bit of pressure with his fingertips, and just like that, he was easily able to cut bite-sized pieces off the bread and jerky that I couldn’t make any progress with whatsoever.

“Wow! That was amazing. Thank you very much!”

I gratefully accepted the pieces and dropped them into the helmet. As I let them boil, I sliced the garlic and black pepper mushrooms with my knife before I added them next.

Garr's nose was twitching. Vice Captain Velrey looked on curiously.

Ulgus's eyes lit up as he stared at the soup. "Man, that smells good..." he murmured.

"Would you like some, too, Ulgus?" I asked.

"Really? Can I?"

"Of course!"

The helmet was large enough to hold quite a lot of soup. There was no way I could eat it all on my own. It was a relief to know someone was going to help me finish it.

After another half an hour or so, the soup was ready to eat.

The soup was cloudy, and the jerky had turned a slightly strange color, but I couldn't let that get to me.

Finally, I get to eat! Just as that thought formed in my head, Vice Captain Velrey pointed something out to me.

"Medic Risurisu, do you have a spoon?"

"Oh no!" I cried.

That's right! I don't have one!

I couldn't believe that after all the work I'd put into making such a wonderful, piping hot soup, I wasn't even going to be able to eat it. I cradled my head in shock and despair. But then, Garr reappeared with something in his hand.

It was a thick leaf, as large as my head, and was attached to a long tree branch. Ulgus offered an explanation. "Ah! That's the leaf you always use to drink water!"

"What?" I asked. *A leaf to drink water with?*

Ulgus went on to describe how Garr would drink water by rolling the leaf up into a cup shape. It was thick and sturdy enough to keep its shape, even underwater.

"Oh! I get it now!" I exclaimed.

I cut a small strip off the leaf, rolled it into a cone, and stuck the tree branch through it, resulting in a very simple spoon. With that, I decided I should also make enough for the other members, so I made more spoons and handed them out to each person.

“Time to taste it!” I announced.

I decided to call this the “Bandit-style Soup of the Forest’s Blessings.” With my handmade spoon, I took my first taste.

“Wow! It’s good!” A smile formed on my face. It was better than I expected.

Everyone around me was smiling too.

I was surprised by how nice the jerky made the broth taste. It didn’t look very appetizing. But I imagined that, once I bit into the actual meat, it was probably the kind that tasted much better than it looked.

Everyone praised the soup’s flavor too.

Even the hard bread had softened up nicely. The bite-sized pieces were soaked with broth and were now easy to eat. The jerky was more tender than before, and the meat’s fat was now nice and soft. Thanks to the garlic, the jerky didn’t give off any unpleasant aromas, while the black pepper mushrooms added a spicy element to the soup.

It was delicious, despite its questionable appearance. I couldn’t help but wonder if this jerky was a special kind, as it wouldn’t normally get so soft.

“You can have some if you’d like, Captain Ludtink,” I offered.

“Nah...” he demurred. “You can have it, Wild Rabbit. I’m sure you’re hungry.”

What’s with this guy? He sure is nice for a bandit.

It surprised me. The captain really did look like the kind of man who robbed and plundered like it was his second nature.

“Thank you. But please, try a bite.” I felt bad that the rest of us were eating nice hot soup without our captain. So I took a spoonful and brought it up to his mouth.

Captain Bandit...er, Captain Ludtink’s eyes went wide.

I almost pulled the spoon back, thinking he didn't want it. But he accepted the bite.

"Do you like it?" I asked.

"It's actually...really good," he said, clearly a little surprised.

"I'm glad. Would you like more?"

"No, that's plenty."

"All right, then."

My guilt was now gone, and I knew I could eat the rest of my soup without worry.

We were so lucky to stumble upon nature's blessings, enough to make a filling meal. I felt gratitude for the knowledge I'd obtained after living my entire life in the woods.

Still, I couldn't help but feel sorry for my squadmates, having to eat such disgusting food all this time. It was so sad to know they just forced themselves to eat this terrible excuse for food. It couldn't be good for their overall health and morale.

Shouldn't they take a step back and consider what actually counts as food?

Well, it didn't really matter. I was totally out of energy for today.

The woods were too dense to pitch tents, so our orders were to sleep wherever we could find space on the ground. *Talk about cruel.*

We did have sleeping bags, at least. But they were thin and cold, and the ground underneath them was lumpy. I sighed.

Vice Captain Velrey laid down next to me. "You did great today," she said appreciatively.

Those simple words felt like all I needed to recover from this difficult day. We had to wake up early the next morning, so I knew I needed to get some sleep.

Thus ended my first day as a member of the Second Expeditionary Squadron of Enoch.

Not that I could get any sleep, camping out in the open near monsters!

Well, the stars sure are beautiful, I thought, desperately trying to distract myself from reality.



DESPITE thinking I couldn't sleep, I ended up passing out that night. I must've been really exhausted. In the morning, Vice Captain Velrey and I went to a nearby lake to wash our faces.

I decided to conduct a water quality test to see if it was drinkable. Lakes and rivers all contained parasites that could render water unfit to drink.

"I didn't know they made tools like that," Vice Captain Velrey said as I pulled my water quality tester out.

"Oh yes!" I replied. "It uses an enchanted stone to accurately measure the water."

Magic spells could be used to make enchanted tools. But this wasn't something just any sorcerer was easily capable of, so these magic items were never cheap. Most tools operated with enchanted stones as their sources of power.

The water quality tester was one of seven tools provided to combat medics. Since this was my first time using it, my fingers were trembling slightly.

"...All right. I'll test it now," I said as I put my tool in the lake.

The test was simple enough. All I had to do was dip the cross-shaped tool into the water. If it was safe to drink, the enchanted stone within the cross would glow blue. Red meant it wasn't safe.

"Oh!" I cried.

"How does it look?"

The stone lit up blue, showing that the water was safe. I didn't hesitate to quench my thirst.

The lake water was clear and refreshing. As I cupped my hands to take gulps of water, I took in the delicious flavor.

I decided to fill my helmet with water to bring back for breakfast.

It was then that I spotted a familiar herb growing next to the lake.

“Ah! Rosemary!”

With its light-blue flowers, the rosemary plant had a refreshing flavor perfect for eliminating any unsavory odors in soups or meat dishes. I plucked as many as I could, since there appeared to be many plants there.

Vice Captain Velrey called out to me in interest, “Impressive, Medic Risurisu. That looked like ordinary grass to me.”

“Well,” I explained, “us Fore Elves rely on the forest plants to get by.”

I’d spent eighteen whole years learning how to live in the woods. It was nothing to bat an eye at.

After returning to camp, I started up another soup pot. Garr even chopped the hard bread and jerky for me. Despite being the stoic type, Garr was quite the gentleman of a wolf.

The ingredients in the soup were essentially the same as yesterday’s. But with the rosemary to give it a strong aroma, today’s soup had a much more refreshing flavor. Despite the delicious, soft fat on the jerky, the flavor was still far from the norm.

Normally, you’d remove the fat before drying the meat like this. *Who exactly made this jerky? The bread’s no different—how could it all turn out as hard as rocks?*

My village’s preserved foods were much better than what the capital provided.

If all rations for knights were this bad, I was eager to see some improvements.

“Now that I think of it,” I said aloud to no one in particular, “Captain Ban—Captain Ludtink sure is taking a long time, huh?”

He’d said he was going on a walk quite a while ago now.

But just then, I heard the sound of distant footsteps, and Garr perked up too.

“Oh! Sounds like he’s back.”

Ulgus’s eyes went wide when I said that. “Wow, Medic Risurisu. Those are

some powerful ears you've got there!"

"Only compared to humans, I suppose," I said matter-of-factly.

A minute later, Captain Ludtink returned to camp, grinning wildly. "Breakfast is served!"

He suddenly thrust some sort of brown bird right in front of my face, totally shocking me.

"EEEEK!"

The bird was missing its head—probably to drain the blood. I saw he'd brought plenty back, enough for everyone in the unit.

"Aaah! Please don't scare me like that!" I clutched my chest to soothe my racing heart as I pleaded with the captain. He laughed heartily, completely ignoring my request.

Despite his rough beard, I wondered if Captain Ludtink was actually younger than he looked. I would have guessed he was somewhere in his mid-thirties, but he acted no different from the annoying brats in my neighborhood. I decided that I needed to act like the big sister here in that case, so I simply grinned and accepted it.

"You already ate breakfast?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"We did," I said as I took some string out of my bag and wrapped it around the birds' feet, then hung them from my horse's saddle.

"Huh... You know what you're doing, don't ya, Wild Rabbit?" the captain asked as he watched me.

"We hunt for all our meat in the forest, after all," I replied.

"When I saw how ya jumped, I thought maybe you hated this kind of thing."

"It wasn't that. Who *wouldn't* jump, suddenly coming face-to-face with a headless bird? Please don't do silly things like that anymore," I insisted.

Once we all finished our breakfasts and prepared for the day, we moved on to our main task of exterminating monsters. We were going to be traveling to a new location today.

Garr began by scouting for any nearby monstrous presence. Ahead of us, he reported, was nothing but monster after monster.

This came as a surprise to me. The forest I grew up in never dealt with any monsters.

But even more shocking than that was the way my squadmates were able to conduct themselves in battle. Their strength was hard to comprehend.

Mists of blood covered everything. Pieces of torn flesh fell to the ground. Entire monster heads flew off toward the distance.

There were many times I had to stop myself from losing my breakfast. *I'll just have to get used to this...* I realized.

After a few battles, lunchtime was suddenly upon us.

We were, of course, planning to eat the birds Captain Ludtink had caught for us earlier that morning. I was looking forward to it. But that didn't seem to be the case for the other members.

Vice Captain Velrey muttered under her breath, "Captain Ludtink really caught us *those* birds again...?"

"Their meat isn't very tasty," Ulgus agreed, and Garr nodded. This conversation came as a surprise to me.

"But," I said, "I think those birds are delicious."

"Even though they really *stink*?"

"Right, that's the issue..." Garr chimed in.

Perhaps humans and wolfmen had different senses of taste compared to my own. I decided to ask Vice Captain Velrey about how they ate these birds, just to be certain.

"Captain Ludtink kills them, drains their blood immediately, plucks the feathers, and roasts the birds whole," she said.

"Does he roast the feathers too?" I asked.

"No, he just plucks them."

"What about the organs?"

“He roasts the whole birds, as-is.”

“Then *that’s* why they stink!”

Birds’ feathers and organs had to be removed properly and washed. Without this step, they’d always give off a bad odor.

I can’t believe they’ve been ruining such a delicious bird!

“I know how to prepare them,” I said, “so please follow my instructions. Birds are delicious when roasted whole. But unless you do it just right, the flavor is totally ruined!”

But as I explained this to them, it hit me.

The people before me were my senior knights and direct superiors. I didn’t think about how bossy I might sound to them.

But Captain Ludtink, Vice Captain Velrey, Ulgus, and Garr all simply nodded their heads obediently. I sighed in relief.

Feeling better, I decided to begin the process of cleaning the birds.

My first step was to boil some water. Letting the birds soak in it had the effect of loosening their pores and making it much easier to pluck all the feathers.

“Wow, look at that! They just come right off.”

Captain Ludtink, with his casual reaction, seemed amused by how quickly I was able to pluck the birds.

I planned to bring the feathers home with me—once I washed them, I could use them to make things like fishing bait or pincushions.

Once I plucked all the feathers I could, I cut off the remaining stubborn ones with a hot knife. If I didn’t remove them all cleanly, the bird would retain its bad odor when we ate its meat.

I finished removing all the feathers, meaning it was time to clean the insides. I stuck my knife through each bird’s butt one by one and removed their organs. I then washed their empty stomachs and filled them with the hard bread, rosemary, garlic, and black pepper mushrooms.

Next, I stuck a few rosemary stems into the surface of the meat. When I

muttered to myself how I needed some kind of metal pole to roast the birds, Garr lent me one of his unused spare spears.

I washed it in the lake, boiled it with hot water, then stuck it through the birds' bodies.

Once I made holders for the spear's left and right sides out of sticks, I started up a fire underneath and allowed the meat to roast over the flames.

I rotated the spear, letting the birds get heated on all sides.

Once the meat was nice and brown, my "Whole-Roasted Wild Bird" meal was complete!

"They sure look good," Captain Ludtink murmured, eyeing the roast birds.

Absolutely. You bet it is!

I took the birds off the spear and placed them atop a large leaf. Before I dug in, I said a prayer of gratitude toward the birds' lives and the nature that had provided for us.

I opened my eyes again to see the rest of the knights in our squadron praying as well.

Watching them pray was a strange sight. They almost looked like real knights... No, that's exactly what they were.

We all took out our knives and began cutting into the freshly roasted meat.

The bird's skin tore with a snap, making way for the warm fat to ooze to the surface. It really did look delicious.

Captain Ludtink stuck his knife into a bird's thigh, biting into the meat while the bone was still attached.

He sure *looked* like a bandit just then.



“Are you enjoying the bird, Captain Ludtink?” I asked a little hesitantly.

“Damn, it’s good!” he said, grinning. “I didn’t expect this.”

I was glad to hear he liked it. The other members followed suit, using their knives to cut off pieces for themselves.

Vice Captain Velrey’s eyes went wide. “I can’t believe this is the same creature we always eat.”

“We’ve been eating it wrong all this time! This is so good!” Clearly, Ulgus was enjoying it too.

Garr’s eyes were wide and sparkling with delight. I felt a sense of relief, knowing he’d come to appreciate the taste of the wild birds.

I decided to dig in next.

I removed the bird’s thigh and dug my knife into its back, letting the fat ooze out.

By slicing the meat into small bites, I could taste the flavor of the bird, bread pieces, and black pepper mushrooms I’d stuck in its stomach all at once.

“Delicious!”

My eyes went wide at the sheer wonder of flavors in my bite. I tried to clearly express my thoughts, but all that came out was a pleased “Eheheh!”

This was what food was all about! The bread was soaked in the bird’s fat, making it melt in my mouth. The gentle rosemary flavor was perfect when paired with the rich black pepper mushrooms.

My serving of meat wasn’t that large. But since it came with bread on the inside too, it was more than enough to fill me up.

My squadmates seemed to prefer to leave some room in their stomach.

After we finished eating, I learned that we had already completed our mission. We were finally able to return to the capital.

I couldn’t help cheering loudly.

“Ah, Captain Ludtink. May I ask you something before we go back?”

I decided to get an answer to the question that had been weighing on my mind ever since that morning.

“What is it, Wild Rabbit?” he asked.

“Do you have a blister on your foot, or something like that?”

“...Why’d you think that?”

“Maybe I’m wrong, but I noticed your body was leaning to one side earlier. So I wondered if your foot was hurting you...”

I quickly donned my cap, worried he might go for my ears again if I was wrong.

Captain Ludtink continued to stare at me with his mouth hanging open.

“Was I...wrong?”

“No,” he said. “That’s exactly right. I burst a blister during that last fight.”

“I see.” In that case, it fell under my work duties. I rolled up my sleeves. “All right, then. Please take your boots off so I can apply a medicinal poultice.”

“Huh?! Right here?” he asked.

“Of course. You’ll feel much better once I’m done.”

His eyes remained wide as saucers as he stared down at me. He sat down and removed his boot when I pressed him to hurry.

“But I haven’t bathed or anything...” he muttered.

“And that bothers you?” I asked, trying not to smirk. “I didn’t think you were so delicate.”

So Captain Ludtink really is a knight, not a bandit. I mentally apologized for calling him the head bandit all this time.

Captain Ludtink kept his foot tucked away from me, seeming strangely embarrassed about the whole thing.

“It’s all right,” I said, smiling. “I’ve taken care of my father and grandfather like this for years.”

The men of my village spent days camping out in the mountains hunting big

game. By the time they arrived back home, the blisters on their soles were in such terrible states.

The magic doctor in my village had taught me how to make a medicinal poultice that helped to fully heal a blister.

I combined some of the herbs I'd brought from home with water and kneaded them together.

First, I washed the bottom of Captain Ludtink's foot with water. Then I wiped it dry and began applying the poultice.

"Ow!!" His face twisted in pain and he glared at me.

"I'm only treating your injury!" I chided.

Ahhh, this is a blast! I slathered on more and more of the poultice, enjoying dishing out this payback for him calling me Wild Rabbit this whole time.

After that, I let his foot sit for a few minutes before cleaning off the poultice.

"How does that feel?" I asked.

"Well...it's a whole lot better," he admitted. "The pain's not nearly as strong now. I feel like I've got more energy too!"

"The bottom of your foot contains many pressure points," I explained. "It's said that stimulating them helps your body feel more relaxed."

"You don't say... Is that another piece of Fore Elf wisdom?"

"Of course!"

Since the herb poultice seemed to help Captain Ludtink, I followed up by applying some to Vice Captain Velrey and Ulgus as well. But since Garr's energy seemed to be at its usual level and he didn't particularly enjoy the herbs' smell either, I decided not to force any poultice on him.



WE arrived back at the knight dormitories after our two-day-long trip. I was covered in quite a bit of grime and dirt, so I was eager to get in the bath as soon as possible.

Captain Ludtink dismissed us when we arrived at the dorm gates. But just as I

was about to head toward the women's dorm, he called out to me.

"Hey, Wild Rabbit."

"Yes?"

Whoops. I didn't mean to respond to that.

"Is somethin' bothering you?"

"You always get my name wrong! My name is Mell Risurisu—*not* Wild Rabbit! On top of that, you shoved a headless bird in my face. Oh, and you even flicked my ears! I didn't appreciate any of that."

"Th-That was just...!" he sputtered.

But then, in a weak voice, he murmured, "I'm sorry." As a generous soul, I decided to forgive him.

Still, I was surprised to learn he'd been concerned about me. I silently apologized once again for calling him "the head bandit."

Our conversation ended, and I was finally free to do as I pleased.

The dorms had large bathtubs full of steaming hot water. I could barely imagine such luxury!

In my village, we boiled water in a pot and added cold water to it to bathe. I only ever got to soak in a bathtub once or twice a month. And the cold water came from our forest's lake, so it wasn't the best to use for a bath.

I gave my body a good scrub before sinking into the large tub. *Ah, this is heaven!*

I was starting to feel like working up the courage to come to the capital was a good move. I even had a chance to learn new things in just a few short days. And after all, forest life was too constrained for me. As long as I couldn't find a husband, that wouldn't change no matter where I traveled.

So I might as well live a comfortable life in a place where I wouldn't be gossiped about behind my back. Of course, I was still lonely without my family around.

Now reminded of my own solitude, I let out a melancholic sigh.

I knew that working as a knight would be difficult. But, with one exception, the members of the Second Squadron all seemed like kind people, which motivated me to give my best efforts.

The royal capital was supposedly filled with all sorts of delicious food too. I was eager to go on a walking tour and fill my stomach.

I decided that once I received my wages, I'd go out to town and buy sweets to send to my little sisters and brothers.



THE next day, I woke up before sunrise, changed clothes, braided my hair, and washed my face.

Breakfast was available in the cafeteria. We had to sign in at the entrance, as the cost of meals would be deducted from our pay.

Today's breakfast was vegetable soup, bread rolls, sausage, and hard-boiled eggs.

The old woman behind the counter built a small mountain of food on my plate.

All knights were allowed as much bread, butter, and jam as we wanted—it was paradise.

"Would you like some more bread, Miss Risurisu?"

"Thank you. But no, that's plenty."

The woman thrust three large bread rolls, each the size of my palm, onto my plate. There was no chance of me having any room for more after that.

I'd always thought I had a big appetite, but when I looked at the other female knights in the cafeteria, I realized they were eating even more than what I'd been served.

Would I get that big and muscular if I trained like them?

No, I was a combat medic. There was no need for me to get so buff.

Once I'd finished breakfast, I made my way to the barracks for the Second Expeditionary Squadron. It was roughly a five-minute walk from the women's

dorm. However, the Royal Order of Enoch consisted of an overwhelming number of male knights. While my dorm was full of women, as soon as I stepped into the expeditionary squadrons' territory, there wasn't one to be seen.

The people I passed in the hallway cast glances my way. I imagined seeing a Fore Elf in such a setting must be unusual.

As I tried to don my jacket and cap—part of the order's uniform when going outside—someone called out to me from behind.

"Whoa! It's a Fore Elf!"

I turned around to see a young, slender knight looking my way. Naturally, he was a complete stranger to me.

"Are you lost? Do you need directions to the forest?"

My long, pointy ears were an immediate target for gawkers.

Could he be any ruder to a woman he just met?!

"What squadron are you in? What's your name?"

Mom always told me not to give my name to strangers.

I pressed my lips together and ignored his questions.

However, I couldn't get over my surprise at how this guy talked to a person he had just met. He wore his shoulder-length hair down, while his necklace and earrings made him stand out in a flashy way.

"Aw, man! So you can't even say hello? Is that a rule of the forest or something?"

"You've got that right!" I wanted to scream at him. But just then, I suddenly felt myself lifted up into the air.

I was staring right into the eyes of a giant bearded man.

"I-I-It's a bandit!!" I cried out involuntarily from fear. But when I looked closer, it was just my captain.

He lifted me up and draped me over his shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes. *Wh-What's going on?!*

“What do ya want with my combat medic, Kinon?”

That seemed to be the gaudy knight’s name. *Interesting...not that I intend to remember it!*

“N-Nothing!” Kinon said. “She just looked like she needed some help.”

What in the Fore Elf Forest is his problem? I didn’t need help with anything! He was totally lying.

“She’s part of my squadron,” Captain Ludtink said. “Don’t mess with her, or you’ll be sorry.”

“R-Right. Understood...” With that, the man darted away. It seemed he and Captain Ludtink knew each other already.

Just when I thought it was all over, a group of knights rushed into the room. They stopped in front of Captain Ludtink.

“What’s going on?”

“We just heard someone shout about bandits...”

“Sorry about that!”

Still draped over the captain’s shoulder, I had to apologize to the knights with my butt facing them.

“I’m sorry. I thought Captain Ludtink was a bandit...”

“Ah, very well then...”

An awkward silence followed. Captain Ludtink finally dismissed the other knights.

But even then, he refused to set me back down. The captain carried me along like I was a piece of luggage.

“I’m all right now. Please put me down.”

“If ya walk so slow, you’ll be a target for creeps.”

“Th-Thank you for helping me out.”

“Mm-hm... Anyhow, are you sure you’ve been eating properly?”

“Yes, I’ve been eating a whole lot...”

“Huh...you’re as light as a feather.”

Well, I don’t think that’s true. Should I eat more bread with breakfast...? No way, I just can’t!

“I don’t think it matters if a combat medic is slender or not,” I said.

“But how’re you gonna keep up on expeditions if you’re not strong and robust?”

“That’s true, I suppose...”

I’d just have to gradually get more accustomed to this new way of life.

During the course of our conversation, we eventually arrived at the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s barracks, where the captain finally put me down.

The barracks were a single, one-story wooden building, three storage sheds, and a stable. It was distinctly run-down...or put a nicer way, it was a building with a long history.

We gathered in the captain’s office for our morning assembly and received each of our respective assignments.

Vice Captain Velrey was to train with Garr, while Ulgus was in charge of giving me the rundown about my work.

The meeting ended after only five minutes. We all dispersed.

“Lower ranked knights get stuck doing a lot of basic tasks no one else wants to do, don’t they...?” I said to Ulgus as we walked on.

“You’ve got that right!” he said.

First, we were to clean the barracks.

“Is it just me,” I asked, “or is this place a total mess?”

“Sorry about that!” Ulgus replied. “I just really hate cleaning.”

Cleaning the barracks was the responsibility of the knights themselves. But here, the hallway was dusty, the rooms unorganized, and dirty dishes were piled up in the small kitchen.

“How often do you *clean* this place?” I asked.

“Once a week...actually, more like once every two weeks.”

I thought I might faint. It was so ridiculously unhygienic!

“Ulgus, you have to clean a building once a day, every day.”

“Are you kidding? I could never—”

“I’m serious!”

“Urk... Okay...”

We divided up the work and began tidying up the barracks.

“You’re doing it wrong, Ulgus! Put some muscle into it!”

I had to teach him the correct methods, since he didn’t even know the essentials of cleaning.

*It’s almost like **he’s** the brand-new member of the squadron...*

We spent our whole morning cleaning the barracks. When Captain Ludtink left to attend a meeting, we took the opportunity to air out his particularly messy office and get the place in order.

“See?” I said once we’d finished. “Doesn’t it feel better to have a clean room?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Ulgus looked even more exhausted after half a day of cleaning than he did when returning home from an expedition. What he needed was some discipline.

After eating lunch in the main cafeteria, Ulgus led me to the small sheds outside.

The first was for storing weapons, the second was for tools, and the third...

“This is the shed where we store preserved foods,” he said.

Here it is! The source of that stiff, disgusting food!

Apparently, the squadron had a budget specifically for food brought on missions, so we could go out and buy it ourselves.

“Some...*stuff* happened, and now we’re allowed to make whatever we want.”

Ulgus explained that they'd borrowed books from the library and learned how to make jerky and dried bread for themselves. Indeed, they had a large amount of stored food.

But it was the food's *quality* that was lacking. As soon as the door creaked open, I was hit with the overwhelming stench of meat.

"Urgh!" I cried.

"Sorry about the smell..." Ulgus said.

Inside were cuts of meat hung from strings and rows of bread sitting out to dry.

"It smells so rotten...!"

"Oh yeah! I completely forgot about the meat I bought the other day."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

The source of the stench was raw meat that Ulgus had left out for two days!

He went on to say that he hadn't had any time to prepare the meat, as their deployment orders had shown up suddenly.

"When you say 'prepare,'" I asked, "does that mean you dry the meat yourself?"

"You bet! Preserving food's another job given to the lower ranks."

"I see. How exactly did this jerky come to be in the first place?" Nervously, I questioned him on his process.

"Well, let's see," Ulgus began. "First, I buy a lump of meat at the market, cut it up into thin strips, roast it, boil it, then let it dry."

"...Oh. I see," I said dryly.

His method was flawed on a fundamental basis. But at the very least, he *did* cook the meat.

If he'd dried the meat raw without using any salt or anything, we definitely would've dropped dead while out on our expedition.

I then worked up the courage to voice my complaints.

“This jerky and the bread are extremely hard, sour, and even flavorless,” I said. “It’s very difficult to eat.”

“We used to think that at first, too. It’s scary how the body adapts to certain things...”

So they really *were* just ignoring their bodies’ own objections to the food! If only they knew that there were perfectly delicious ways of drying meat that didn’t require such restraint.

“We need to *fix* this, Ulgus,” I said firmly.

“Agreed,” he said. “I look forward to working with you.”

I felt like this was a problem we needed to tackle immediately.

“Let’s start by going to the market.”

My fellow low-ranking knight and I set out on our new quest: to make delicious jerky!



ULGUS and I headed for the marketplace.

It was my very first time visiting the capital city’s marketplace, so I found my heart racing in anticipation. I clutched my wallet to my chest with a string attached to it, so that I wouldn’t fall victim to one of the area’s many pickpockets.

“It’ll be all right, Medic Risurisu,” Ulgus said reassuringly. “No one’s dumb enough to steal a knight’s wallet.”

“You don’t know that!”

For someone to resort to stealing, their mental state needs to be severely compromised, so you never truly know what they might be capable of. And I needed to be very careful—my wallet had my savings inside it, too. I couldn’t be apart from it for a single second.

After a thirty-minute walk from the order’s headquarters, we arrived at the marketplace. The long rows of shops were overwhelming to see in person.

“This place is incredible,” I said in awe.

“It gets so crowded here during festivals,” Ulgus told me, “you can hardly even move.”

“Goodness... I can only imagine how hard it must be for the knights who’re supposed to patrol the festival.”

“Well, since we don’t have enough men to cover festivals, even us expeditionary squadrons get deployed for it.”

“Y-You’re kidding...”

Someone my size would get turned into a meatball in such a packed crowd!

We kept chatting as we entered the marketplace. Instantly, I was met with the sight of miscellaneous goods stores.

I gazed at all the cute kinds of porcelain cups with plants and animals painted on them; they reminded me I didn’t have any cups of my own. But as much as I wanted some, I’d have to wait for a time when I wasn’t on the clock.

The next store was full of neat rows of pens. When I saw the pens’ beautiful flower engravings, I wanted to scoop them up too. They even had many colors of ink aside from black, which I was eager to check out. When we crossed the street, we saw a florist’s shop.

Common wildflowers from the Fore Elf Forest were flying off the shelves at high prices. I couldn’t help but ponder opening up a shop here myself someday.

Next door was a bakery. The smell of roasting bread made me salivate, and the mountain of baked goods before us was completely overwhelming.

They had sweet bread filled with chocolate, custard, and whipped cream. I’d never eaten anything like those before! But as curious as I was, it’d have to wait for another time.

“Oh!” I said to Ulgus, suddenly remembering. “We need to buy some bread for our rations too.”

Unsurprisingly, the knights didn’t make their own bread—they simply sliced up bread purchased from bakeries and dried it out.

All this time, they’d been fine with eating anything at all, so long as it wasn’t moldy!

They believed you could preserve anything by just drying it. But I hoped to set the record straight.

“Any thoughts on what kind of bread we should buy to preserve, Medic Risurisu?” Ulgus asked me.

“Well, I don’t think they’d have it here...”

Normal bread only remains edible for about two weeks. But the kind I was familiar with could last up to three months.

Once a year, I explained to Ulgus, our forest got hit by a large blizzard. This stopped the stoves from heating properly, preventing us from baking any bread. So we always spent a day preparing a month’s worth of bread before that blizzard hit. And only then did we make use of a special ingredient—natural yeast.

“Natural...yeast?” Ulgus asked.

“That’s right!”

Most long-lasting bread tended to be sour. But the special bread from our village was fluffy and dissolved in your mouth. And it wasn’t very sour at all, either! I was always eager to eat it, so I actually looked forward to snowy days.

“Wow, you guys really do all that?” Ulgus asked as I kept explaining.

“We do,” I replied. “In my village, we go to another town outside the forest to learn natural yeast-making when we turn fifteen.”

We cultivated our yeast until the time came to be married. *But depressingly enough, my natural yeast alone would never be enough to land me a husband...*

And I just couldn’t leave my three years’ worth of natural yeast behind, so I’d taken it with me, allowing me to make bread whenever I wanted.

“So please leave all the bread baking to me,” I said happily.

“I really appreciate it,” Ulgus smiled. “I’d like to steer clear of sour bread from now on, if possible...”

“I couldn’t agree more...”

I’d never forget that stiff, strangely sour bread for the rest of my life.

Sourness from the yeast alone would've been a different story. But this bread was incomprehensible... *I should just be grateful that we didn't get sick!*

"By the way," Ulgus asked, "can you not make natural yeast in your own village? You said you had to leave to make it."

"That's right. It requires fungus from a calf's intestine after it drinks its mother's first form of milk. We don't keep livestock ourselves, so we have to go elsewhere to access them."

"Wow...fungus from a calf's intestines? That's really how you make natural yeast?"

"Yes. It makes delicious bread that retains water, lasts a long time, and doesn't grow moldy."

We gathered lots of nuts and mushrooms in our forest that farmers were happy to trade in exchange for access to their calves' fungus. But it was still difficult to manage the yeast, and it wasn't uncommon to find out a batch had spoiled somewhere along the way. So we dug holes in our dirt back in the village and buried them to keep them stored away safely.

Fortunately, the dormitory cafeteria had a large underground cellar where I had received permission to store my yeast. It was something we needed to look after every day. So when we returned from our two-day expedition, I worried about whether or not it was still healthy. Thankfully, my yeast remained problem free.

The secret to fluffy bread that keeps for long periods of time is the symbiosis of yeast and lactic acid bacilli. It even helps boost the digestive and immune systems, too—a tasty and healthy meal all in one.

However, this bread's dough was much softer than normal, making it harder to work with. Most women in my village actually wanted nothing to do with the process. But since I didn't hate doing it, and it only came up once a month, I never saw bread-making as a problem.

"I'm definitely looking forward to trying it," Ulgus grinned.

"I'll get the job done!"

We pushed on, passing produce stands and canned goods and dried food shops.

The end of the food district contained the butcher shops. The wide variety of meats strung up in the storefronts was completely overwhelming.

“Oh, Medic Risurisu!” Ulgus cried. “They’re having a sale on meat here!”

The shop clerk recommended fatty cuts of three-horned cow meat—a normal cow that sported three horns from its head.

“Hang on a moment, Ulgus,” I said before he could buy anything. “You’re supposed to remove the fat before making jerky, so please look for leaner pieces of meat. Also, I *do* hear that three-horned cow jerky is tasty, but it’s not easy for beginners, and once you remove the fat, there won’t be much meat left.”

I looked around the shop until I found a better option. “Oh, you can get a lump of boar-pig for a great price. Let’s go with this instead,” I said.

Boar-pigs were livestock with large tusks. Despite their frightening appearance, they made for delicious meat. My village usually made jerky out of wild deer meat, although boar-pig jerky was the tastiest kind. Since we never raised livestock, it was a delicacy.

The boar-pig here at the butcher’s cost less than half of what my village had been paying our meat peddlers. I realized then just how badly we’d been getting ripped off all this time.

But I set my newfound anger aside and purchased as much meat as we could afford. Ulgus told me it was a lot cheaper than usual, since they primarily used beef for their rations.

The barracks already had salt and pepper on hand, so I bought sugar, a few seasonings, and two bottles of wine.

Once all our shopping was done, we returned to the barracks. I decided to start preserving the food right away before it went bad.

I got to work in the barracks’ small kitchen with Ulgus as my assistant. I washed my hands, tied up my hair, put my apron on, and started prepping the

ingredients.

“First,” I explained, “we’re going to pierce the surface of the meat with forks.”

It was easier for salt and spices to permeate the entire cuts when there were holes in the surface. Next, I sprinkled salt along with powdered and dried spices over the meat and kneaded them all together. Once that was done, I placed the cuts of meat in a clean leather pouch and moved them to a cold room where they could sit for seven days. During that time, I was going to have to occasionally flip the meat and remove the juices that leaked out.

“This takes a while, doesn’t it?” Ulgus asked.

“Yes, it’s a lot of work,” I affirmed.

I explained that letting the cuts ripen in the salt took seven days. Desalinating took half a day, drying took another day, and even after all that, the jerky still wouldn’t be done until it went through a few more hours of smoking.

“And that’s the end of it,” I finished. “These won’t be done for a while.”

“I see.”

Ulgus was a young man who was eager to learn as he noted down the recipe in his notebook.

“What other kinds of preserved foods are there?” he asked me.

“Well, they don’t count in the traditional sense, but cookies with dried fruit can last up to two months. They even taste better the longer you wait to eat them.”

Mushrooms also kept for a long time when dried. They make a nice broth for soup.

“I know we go on expeditions for work, but I *would* kind of like to eat decent meals out there too.” Ulgus spoke as if he was describing a dream. But I wholeheartedly agreed.

My squadmates had a grueling job exterminating monsters when we were out on missions. I suddenly felt like coming up with more ways to help them enjoy some delicious food during their brief moments of respite.



WE ended up stopping for the day after cleaning up and making the jerky. It wouldn't be ready for ten more days, so I could only pray that we didn't have to go on any missions before then.

Supposedly, the rate of expeditions was quite varied. At times, knights didn't even have a moment to rest after returning home before having to ship out again. Other times, they could go an entire month without a mission.

Tomorrow, I was going to bake some natural yeast bread. I wanted to use a real oven for it, but wasn't sure where to get one of those. *And the cafeteria probably won't let me use theirs.*

I also wanted to add more variety to the rations. Bread and jerky alone just weren't going to cut it.

Smoked meats and cookies would keep a while, too. I could also bring delicious things like jam and liver pâté as bread toppings. But would it be too hard to take jars with me? *Hmmm, if I bring marinated vegetables, we probably won't have to worry about nutritional deficiencies while out on an expedition. Oh, and oil-marinated clams too! Those are so good.*

Ocean fish were a delicacy to us Fore Elves who lived in the woods. I wondered if they were also being sold for cheap in the capital's marketplace. I'd have to investigate that some other time.

I could also preserve fruit in honey or simply dry it out. The more I thought about it, the more fun I started to have. Not that I exactly wanted to go out on another mission right now...

The whole reason I could sit back and think about food like this in the first place was because the other squad members were so incredibly strong.

And I was entirely reliant on them.



THE workday ended once the sky began to turn orange. We gathered again in Captain Ludtink's office for our evening meeting.

"I don't got anything to discuss tonight," he said simply. "I'd like to dismiss

you...but...Velrey..."

Vice Captain Velrey seemed to have something she wanted to say, although I didn't have the slightest clue what that might be.

"We're going to have a welcome party tonight for our newest member, Medic Risurisu," she said suddenly.

My ears twitched in shock. I looked around the room to see that everyone else was perfectly calm. It seemed like this party was only news to me.

"You don't have plans, do you, Medic Risurisu?" Vice Captain Velrey asked.

"No, not at all!" I replied. "Um...I really appreciate it!"

A welcome party was the last thing I expected. I started to tear up a bit.

Before I came to the Enoch Royal Order, I was rejected from all sorts of jobs for being a Fore Elf. I even started to think I'd never find work in a human city. But that was before I found this place that accepted me with open arms. These people saw me as one of their own. I truly wanted to thank them from the bottom of my heart.

"Let's get to it, then," said Captain Ludtink. "We reserved a restaurant already."

"Th-Thank you very much. I hardly deserve this...!"

"Don't mention it," he said. "It's nice to kick back and celebrate once in a while."

We set out to town, still dressed in our uniforms.

Many more people were on the streets than when I went with Ulgus in the afternoon. Everyone was rushing around in a hurry, carrying large boxes and bags.

Even now, I never got sick of looking at all the different shops as we passed by them. Vice Captain Velrey pointed out the best bakeries and cafes to me.

"Is there anything you don't like to eat, Medic Risurisu?" she asked.

"No, not at all. I love all meat, vegetables, fish, and every single kind of food!" I told her.

Growing up in such a large, impoverished family, I became quite a glutton without an ounce of pickiness to me. I ate the skins and roots of vegetables and even made candy out of tree sap sometimes.

Once I became one of the older kids, all the extras had to go to my younger siblings, and I started to go out to the woods to pick tree nuts or berries. I also baked cookies filled mainly with flour because we had nothing else. Most of what I harvested and baked had gone to my hungry siblings too, so I rarely ate much of any of it.

“Well, let’s eat well tonight, Medic Risurisu,” Vice Captain Velrey said.

“You can have my share of meat too!” Ulgus chimed in.

My squadmates were sympathetic after hearing that snippet of my life story. I thought this sort of upbringing was common, but maybe it was unusual for city people.

As we walked and chatted, we eventually arrived at the restaurant the captain had reserved. It looked like a popular place, seeing how it was so crowded. Most of the occupants were fellow knights.

“Welcome! Oh, it’s Crow!”

A very tall young lady with blonde hair and blue eyes greeted us. She wore her long hair half-up and had a mole under the right corner of her lips, giving her an extremely sensual look.

The girl clung to Captain Ludtink’s arm and gushed about how long it’d been since they’d last met. It sounded like all the Second Expeditionary Squadron members were regulars here.

And I was really impressed at how Captain Ludtink showed no reaction to having such a beautiful girl wrapped around his arm.

Maybe bandit-like men are popular here...

“Long time no see, Garr!” She went on to greet and hug him, Ulgus, and Vice Captain Velrey one after another. This young lady certainly was affectionate, although not a single person was reacting to her hugs.

What’s going on?

“Zara, this is our newest member,” Vice Captain Velrey introduced me. “She’s Mell Risurisu, a combat medic.”

“Oh my gosh, a Fore Elf! We don’t see your kind here much.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“My name’s Zara Ahto.”

“Hello, Zara...” I reached my hand out to shake hers, only to have Zara grab it to pull me close to her. “Whoa!”

For some reason, I received an equally passionate hug as well.



“...Hmm?”

Her body's kind of...stiff for a lady...?

“You're so cute...”

Her voice, murmured into my ear, was deeper and scratchier than most women's voices.

I blushed. It was the first time anyone had ever called me “cute!”

After what felt like more than enough time, I tried to pull away, only to have her hug me tighter and refuse to let go. I had no clue what was happening anymore.

“That's *enough*, Zara.” Captain Ludtink put a stop to it.

“Sorry, I couldn't help it...” she said, releasing me.

“Zara always tries to hug people, so don't let your guard down,” Captain Ludtink warned me.

“Don't make my hugs sound like a bad thing, Crow! That's so mean.”

“That's *exactly* what they are! Tell me what man out there likes to get hugged by another man when he doesn't go for that sorta thing!”

“But all our customers love my hugs...”

Um, did Captain Ludtink just call the pretty lady a man? Did I hear that right...?

When I shot a glance at the person who hugged me, she responded with a wink. Unsure how to react, I just smiled awkwardly.

“Yeah, he's a guy,” Ulgus said matter-of-factly.

“Huh?! Zara's a man?!” I cried, perhaps a bit too loud.

“Yeah. He used to be a knight. They called him the ‘Ferocious Ax-wielding Prince.’”

“Eeeek!!”

There was so much to be shocked about, I kind of didn't know where to start.

Zara just looked like a beautiful woman to me. Although his voice *was* deep, and he was really tall too. Even his chest was hard and flat.

Apparently, he had quit being a knight and started to work as the star attraction—his words, not mine—for this restaurant.

“But if you’ve got cute girls like Melly here as part of the knights now, maybe I’ll come back!” he exclaimed.

At that, Vice Captain Velrey spoke up. “Really?” she asked. “I’d love to have you join us, Zara. We have too much firepower and not much else.”

“Aw, but I don’t wanna go on expeditions! I can’t take baths, and the food is gross!”

I also learned that Zara used to be part of the imperial bodyguards who protected the first-born princess. He didn’t have to go on expeditions, but he still quit due to various complaints.

“That’s true about the baths,” Vice Captain Velrey admitted. “But Medic Risurisu is improving our food. She just made us a great soup out in the field by using her helmet as a pot.”

“Interesting.” Zara glanced at me. I didn’t know what he was thinking, but what he said next was completely unexpected. “How about if you can make me some rations that tickle my fancy, then I’ll join your squadron?”

To my utter surprise, I was suddenly on the receiving end of a challenge. But Vice Captain Velrey was pleased to hear this.

“Zara’s as good as a hundred knights! You can do this, Medic Risurisu!”

“Uh, um... Sure...?”

I didn’t really understand what was happening. We apparently wanted Zara to join our unit, so I was going to have to cook for him. But since I didn’t have any rations to work with yet, the challenge would have to take place at a later date.

“Ah, sorry about that!” Zara said suddenly. “I didn’t mean to talk your ear off. I’ve got a table ready for you in the back!”

He led us past the noisy crowds to a quiet room in the back corner. We were going to be served a course of the chef’s recommendations.

“Let’s start with a toast,” Captain Ludtink said.

I didn’t drink alcohol, so they gave me a cup of fruit juice instead. It was Ulgus who led the toast.

“To Medic Risurisu, our new squadmate!”

We raised our wooden cups. My grape juice was sour, but sweet enough to be plenty tasty. After that, the dishes were brought in one after another.

Zara carried in a giant pie served on a round tray. The crust was soft and puffy on top, baked to an appetizing golden-brown color.

“Here, Melly. This is our most famous dish.”

He called it a three-horned beef pie. It was bigger than my head and large enough to feed five people. Zara sliced into it, allowing the juices to ooze out from the center.

He placed the slices onto smaller plates and handed me a knife and fork.

After that, he added a serving of steamed mashed potatoes. They were filled with herbs and looked equally delicious.

I wanted to dig in immediately, but I needed to say a prayer first.

Thank you, gods, for this incredible meal! May this food nourish both my body and soul!

Of course, the actual prayer I said changed daily; all that mattered was staying loyal to my faith.

With that, I wasted no time in taking a bite of the beef pie. I cut into it with my knife. The crust crumbled away, revealing a center filled with soft, simmered minced meat. I cut away a bite and stuck it in my mouth.

“Ouch...!”

I had to huff and puff to cool down the piping hot pie. Once it was tolerable, I slowly started to chew.

“Mm?! ”

I furrowed my brow and focused every cell in my brain on savoring this taste.

It's amazing! Totally and completely amazing!

The first surprise was how rich the flavor of the butter was. They must've used it to flavor not just the crust, but the meat inside too. The meat was further seasoned with spices, eliminating any unsavory odor and leaving behind only the most desirable flavors.

Taking a bite of meat and potatoes together after that added a whole new combination of spices and flavors, making it even richer than before. It was fantastic.

"Do you like it, Medic Risurisu?" Vice Captain Velrey kindly called out to me as she watched me taking bite after bite of pie like I was in some sort of trance.

"Issh amashing...!" My tongue was too overwhelmed to speak.

One by one, they brought in soup, nut and meat stir-fry, and steamed fish after that. Every dish was delicious.

From the bottom of my heart, this food made me truly glad that I came to the city. I knew I'd have to come back here again once I received my pay.



IT was the night after my lovely welcome party.

Captain Ludtink had ordered us to spend the day preparing preserved food and cleaning out the storage shed. I didn't mind adding to the rations we had, but there was a step before that first. We had to dispose of the bread and jerky Ulgus had worked so hard to make. But we couldn't just throw it all out in the trash; that would be wasteful.

"So what do we do with it all, Medic Risurisu?" Ulgus asked me.

"We're going to eat it," I declared firmly, "no matter how hard it may be!"

Fortunately, our food stash wasn't that plentiful since we'd just returned from an expedition. But it was enough to make a meal out of the jerky and dried bread.

"I'll be making today's lunch with our remaining rations," I said.

"Fun!" Ulgus cheered, clapping his hands together.

I already had a proper plan formed as to how to reduce our unwanted preserved food.

I placed four leather bags on the table.

“Here, look at the first and second bags.”

“Leaves and...potatoes, huh?” Ulgus cocked his head.

“That’s right.” I’d purchased all the unusable scraps of food that the cafeteria couldn’t work with for extra cheap. “And here’s the third bag.”

“Meat fat?”

“Correct.”

Apparently, the knights threw away all leftover meat fat. That was such a waste! Fat’s a perfectly good cooking ingredient, too!

The final bag was full of what I’d spent the night making at the cafeteria.

“Oh, it’s bread!” Ulgus cried.

“Yes. This is natural yeast bread. I sure hope you all like it.”

I hadn’t made any in a long time, so the loaf was lumpy and misshapen. But it didn’t turn out terrible in the end.

I rolled up my sleeves, tied my hair back, threw on an apron, and was ready to get started.

“Can you please grate this into crumbs, Ulgus?” I handed him the unsavory, dry bread.

“Oh, okay,” he said.

The bread was stiff enough that grating it down was going to require quite a bit of muscle. *You can do it, Ulgus!*

While he busied himself with that, I washed a large batch of potatoes and started to boil them in a pot. I then diced the beef jerky and meat fat I’d left out in water overnight and rubbed them down with herbs to cover their odor.

I hadn’t eaten much three-horned cow meat before. But I was impressed to see how, after being turned into jerky, it could regain its original softness just by

placing it in water. I wondered if this was unique to the animal or if it was, in fact, due to Ulgus's unusual meat-drying technique. Most meats just didn't turn out like this.

Once I salted and peppered the meat, I started to fry it.

An appetizing smell rose up from the simmering beef strips. Even at this point in the recipe, I was sure they would be delicious.

I then set the cooked meat aside to rest.

Next, I took the boiled potatoes out of the pot and drained the water.

I left the potatoes unpeeled, since their skins were nutritious. Once I sprinkled lots of salt and pepper on the steaming potatoes, I used a rolling pin to mash them up.

"Meat and potatoes... They look so good," Ulgus drooled.

"I'm sure they'd taste great, even just like this." I smiled. "Have you finished with the bread yet?"

"No, not quite. I'll keep at it."

Ulgus appeared to be struggling with how he grated the bread. I knew how tough it must be to grind up such a hard substance.

Since I felt bad for him, I decided to place some beef atop a portion of mashed potatoes, roll it up, and feed it to him while he worked.

"It's... It's so good...!" he cheered.

"Well, it's only going to get better," I promised.

"I can't wait!"

I also added some of the herbs I dried to the breadcrumbs, hoping it'd eliminate their sour taste.

My next step was to mold the mashed potatoes. I placed some on the palm of my hand, spread it out flat, set a piece of meat on top, and wrapped it all together.

I felt like each squad member could probably eat five of these, so that's how many I made. I squeezed them tight, dispelling all the air to ensure they

wouldn't fall apart during the next steps.

When I finished molding the meat and potatoes, I dunked them in scrambled eggs and rolled them in the breadcrumbs Ulgus had now finished.

All that was left was to fry the bundles in oil.

The pot in my possession was an unused one I'd borrowed from the kitchen. The oil I'd bought myself. Apparently, I'd be able to have the royal order foot the bill for it.

The eggs were what I had received for helping out with the dishwashing in the cafeteria. *I definitely made the right choice!*

Ulgus stared at the frying bundles, fascinated.

"What do you call this dish?" he asked. "I've never seen it before."

"Let's see... They're not 'crockets'... I think it's 'croquettes?' I'm sorry, I don't remember exactly."

I'd eaten it at a food cart a long time ago, when I visited another village for a festival. But today was my very first time making them. A meal that used this much oil was a luxury. I couldn't cook it back at home.

I dried the croquettes of oil and placed them on a plate. My "Leftover-filled Croquettes" were complete!

I then placed some veggies on the plate to give it a nice color and a little more nutrition. They were seasoned with spices too, so they'd probably pair nicely with bread.

My bread was still too fluffy, so I crushed it up and toasted it.

As much as I loved the fluffy bread, I knew some people believed that bread should always be nice and crunchy, so I wanted both kinds to be available.

We finished just in time for lunch, so I called the other squad members in to dine in our break room together.

Everyone was surprised to see the unexpected meal before them. I decided not to tell them it was made with our jerky and dried bread.

Before we ate, we said a prayer. These times of silence were the only times I

saw the members as true knights. I loved these special moments.

When we'd finished praying, Vice Captain Velrey asked me, "What are these, Medic Risurisu?"

"Croquettes and bread. I think they'll go well together."

It was heavily seasoned, so it probably didn't need any sauce to complete the dish. *Probably...*

When I told them I had both hard and soft bread to choose from, Captain Ludtink and Garr went with hard bread while Vice Captain Velrey and Ulgus took the soft kind. They each dug their forks into their croquettes and placed them atop the bread. I took some soft bread for myself, topped it with leafy greens, and finished off with a croquette on top.

It didn't seem like croquettes were something eaten around here.

"Boiled, mashed potatoes, huh?" Captain Ludtink said. "We mostly eat potatoes in soup."

"I see... Well, our village was the same way. Digging for potatoes before snow covered the ground was actually quite difficult, as your hands would go numb from the cold."

Talking about it took me back. "I used to cut a slit into the soft, freshly dug potatoes and roast them on a grill over the furnace. They were so delicious..."

"That sounds great..." Ulgus said.

"I'd eat them with my secret stash of butter and cheese..." I reminisced fondly. *But now's hardly the time to relive memories!* I took a bite of my croquette before it got cold.

"Mmm!"

The croquette was so crispy! And the soft bread practically melted in my mouth. I loved the way the crisp vegetables felt as I chewed on them. I could barely taste the sourness in those breadcrumbs either, probably because the spices were doing their job.

I could taste a faint sweetness in the freshly baked potatoes. With each bite, juices from the meat fat came dribbling out, soaking into the potato layer to

form a wonderful combination. Bread and croquettes truly belonged together. It had turned out better than I thought it would! I broke out in a grin. Everyone else began to eat when they saw that.

“Wow, they’re so good! Even better than I imagined!” Ulgus was tearing up as he cried out to me in awe. “I’m really glad I didn’t give up on making these breadcrumbs!”

“Yes, you were a big help,” I smiled. “I never could’ve done it alone.”

Captain Ludtink, Vice Captain Velrey, and Garr all agreed that it was a tasty meal.

I wasn’t sure what to do with these rations at first, but I’d managed to make use of them. I let out a sigh of relief.

When we finished eating and I handed the bill for the ingredients over to Captain Ludtink, he furrowed his brow.

“Come on, Medic Rabbit!” he scoffed. “This *can’t* be all it cost to make this lunch.”

He’d started calling me “Medic Rabbit” instead of “Wild Rabbit” lately. *Even though that’s basically the exact same thing. Well, at least he added the “medic” title...*

But I cast those thoughts away and returned to the topic of the lunch bill.

“You’re trying to cover some of this yourself, aren’t ya?” he asked me.

“No, I’m not,” I protested. “That’s the real amount.”

His suspicious gaze was piercing. With no other choice, I disclosed the recipe.

“The ingredients for the croquettes were scrap vegetables I got from the cafeteria, meat fat they were going to dispose of, and the dried bread and jerky from our rations. I *did* buy the potatoes, but they were less than half the price of what you’d get at the marketplace.”

“Are you kidding me right now?”

“You told us to clear out the food shed,” I said. “So I decided to make a meal of it.”

Captain Ludtink was speechless. He couldn't believe that something so delicious was partially made from food scraps.

I couldn't help but break into a pleased smirk.

I'd succeeded in cleaning out the food shed and even managed to make a wonderful lunch out of it. Today was a day of great results.

As I sat in bed later, I started to plan the rations I'd work on tomorrow...then remembered that, of course, I had my combat medic duties too.

All this cooking threatened to make me forget my true role! There were bandages to check over, ointments to organize, medicinal herbs to select, and many, many more tasks.

Patting my cheeks to rid my mind of distractions, I began to prepare for tomorrow's work.

Chapter 2: A Giant Steamed Fish Wrapped in a Leaf

AFTER Ulgus and I finished tidying up the storage shed and were working on the jerky and bread for rations, our unit suddenly received orders to head out on an expedition. I grabbed my medical bag straight away and checked its contents.

I saw my white gloves, bandages, slings, cotton, disinfectant, eyepatches, scissors, tweezers, and stitches. I had things like anti-itch cream, eye drops, throat lozenges, poultice, and ointment for medicine. I also had my magic water quality tester packed and ready. All of these items were supplied to me by the Royal Order when I signed up as a combat medic. I also had my own ointments and poultices I'd made in my village and brought with me.

Next, I ran to the storage shed.

Our marching orders were for a two-day mission. But just to be safe, I packed enough bread and jerky to last three days. The bread was fluffy and thus bulkier.

It's not exactly heavy. But it could be a problem.

I also picked up some olive oil and fruit that had been simmered in sugar and honey. These were both ingredients I had bought at the market, as I didn't have time to make them myself. But I knew they would be delicious when eaten on bread. Only after I put them in my bag did I realize how heavy it all was, so I ended up leaving the fruit behind.

Next, I prepared enough water for each member, then added mint and citrus juices to their waterskins. Mint promoted good digestion and prevented insomnia, while citrus juice could relieve fatigue and fight off colds.

On our last mission, I had asked what the strange taste of herbs was in the water we'd been given, only to be told they were simply dried medicinal herbs chosen at random. *Talk about sloppy work...*

The others had told me their previous medic had instructed them to add

sterilizing herbs to the water to keep it from spoiling and tasting foul. I just wished that the medic would've been more specific in teaching them about the right kind of herbs to use. For this mission, I decided to make the usual citrus mint water I drank at home. I imagined the knights would find it just as refreshing and easy to drink. I pulled the medical bag up and onto my shoulder and slung the food bag on my back.



I ended up being the last squad member to arrive at the meet-up spot.

"You're late, Medic Rabbit!" Captain Ludtink shouted in his bandit-like way.

"I'm sorry!" I said.

I ended up taking too much time by going back to the kitchen for a pot. It was hanging over the other bag on my back. The pot in question was one the cafeteria ladies had been planning to throw out but let me have it instead. It was quite heavy, but it'd serve as a good shield for my back.

"What's with the pot? And all the bags?" Ludtink asked. "This isn't a field trip."

So I really did bring too much food... But after I insisted that this luggage would be my burden to carry around, not theirs, Ludtink's scruffy face twitched in exasperation.

"It's the horses I'm worried about, not you!"

Despite being luggage, the bread itself was fluffy and didn't weigh much. I begged the captain to let me keep all my bags.

"Warm, delicious food is good for the whole body!"

In all honesty, I wasn't sure if it affected one's health at all. But I could certainly say delicious food was key to higher work morale... *Probably...*

Captain Ludtink threw me a sharp, thuggish glare. I couldn't help but flinch. Thankfully, Vice Captain Velrey stepped in to help me out.

"Medic Risurisu has a point, Captain Ludtink. The fatigue on an expedition's last day is nothing like on the first. I'd bet it's because we need a little more nutrition."

“...You really think so?” Ludtink asked.

Vice Captain Velrey nodded. So did Ulgus and Garr.

“Fine,” Ludtink said to me. “Let’s see you prove it on this mission.”

“No problem!” I replied with my best enthusiasm.

Captain Ludtink then briefed us on our mission. Our destination was a forest about five hours south of the capital. Word had come of an invading swarm of monsters known as horned toads—a swarm of thirty or so toads.

Our work would be done if we managed to wipe out at least two-thirds of them. Captain Ludtink was aiming to make this a two-day endeavor.

At the stable, I brought out my horse. But just as I tried to mount it...

“...Hmm?”

Every time I lifted my foot to place it in the stirrup, I felt myself pulled backward.

Is my pot too heavy for me? The cafeteria lady told me it was heavy and hard to move.

But it didn’t *feel* very heavy slung on my back. I wondered if I could hang it off the saddle somehow instead.

“Medic Rabbit! What are you doing now?!” Ludtink bellowed.

“I’m s-sorry!” I cried.

I needed to mount my horse quickly, or else he’d demand I leave my pot behind. But just as I gave it another go, my feet were suddenly dangling in the air.

“Eek!”

To my surprise, Garr, the wolfman, lifted me up and placed me on my horse.

“Th-Thank you very much!” I said, flustered.

He gave a big nod in response. Garr was a silent man, but he was still incredibly kind.

I wasn’t really sure how to read him when we’d first met due to how little he

talked. But then I discovered something crucial: Garr's tail wagged slightly when he was happy and drooped when he was upset. At times, his eyes even lit up or his face fell with sadness. Visually, he was a very expressive person.

I thanked Garr again as he walked away.

Finally, it was time for us to leave. Captain Ludtink led the way, followed by Ulgus, then Garr and I alongside each other, while Vice Captain Velrey brought up the rear.

After a while, we stopped alongside a lake for a brief rest.

When Vice Captain Velrey and I left to relieve ourselves, I happened to find some raspberries, so I plucked them from the vine and filled a leather pouch. I also spotted some oregano, so I grabbed that too.

When we returned to the lakeside, Captain Ludtink was sprawled out on the grass and Ulgus was tending to his bow and arrow. Garr's eyes were closed in what I assumed was meditation.

"Would you like some raspberries, Ulgus?" I asked.

"Oh, definitely. Thanks!"

I placed a few fresh raspberries on his outstretched hand.

"What about you, Captain Ludtink?"

"I don't like sour things," he answered without even opening his eyes.

"But I picked out the ripest ones..."

"No thanks."

"As you wish."

I split the rest with Vice Captain Velrey and Garr, then popped the rest into my mouth. My careful selection had paid off—they were a tasty sweet and sour combination.

I looked out at the beautiful lake. As I gazed at the water and reached for another raspberry, it slipped out of my hand and rolled away.

Before I could make a move, it had splashed into the water.

“Ah!”

But then something shocking happened. I noticed a ripple in the water’s surface, followed by a gigantic fish popping up to eat the raspberry.

“Whoa!!” As soon as I laid eyes on that fish, I cried out in awe. “That’s a really expensive fish!! I want it!!”

Garr reacted to my earnest cry instantly. He grabbed his nearby spear and threw it straight at the fish—from nearly six feet away!

“Wow!”

His spear pierced the fish cleanly. Garr then reeled in the string he kept attached to the spear, drawing it back toward him. The fish struggled, but Garr’s tugging was relentless—much stronger than any fight a fish could put up.

Once it was dragged to shore, the fish began flopping all over the ground.

“Oh, you did it!! You’re incredible, Garr!!” I joined the fish in jumping, although mine was from joy.

These fish only inhabited lakes and were sometimes called “the king of the forest.” My grandfather had eaten one once long ago, and its incredible taste was so inspiring, he was moved to paint pictures of the fish.

I never thought I’d find one in a forest near the capital!

“Wow, good work!” Ulgus said as he approached us, just as impressed.

“Thank you!”

After seeing the catch, Captain Ludtink suggested we prepare lunch now, even though it was still early.

“Really? You don’t mind?!” I asked.

“Nah,” he said. “I don’t want to lug such a big fish around with us.”

He was right—I knew I had no pouches that could hold such a large fish. With the captain’s permission, I began prepping the fish right away. First, I asked Ulgus to go retrieve some big leaves I saw in the forest, and while he was away, I planned to gut and clean the fish.

That task began with chopping off the head. I took out my cooking knife and

slipped it into the gills. But...

“Urgh! *Grrrrrrr!*”

Be it my small knife or the fish’s sheer size, I just couldn’t get it to cut. I commenced battling with the fish until I heard a voice next to me.

“Gimme that, Medic Rabbit,” Captain Ludtink said simply.

“Th-Thank you...” I said as I handed him my knife.

He managed to chop the head off in one swift motion. I quickly realized he was offering to cut the rest of the fish up too.

“It’ll take too long if I let you do it,” he said.

“I appreciate the help!”

With the head gone, the next step was to open up the stomach. This was done by inserting the knife into the fish’s anus and slicing it all the way up to its head.

“Damn,” Ludtink said as he struggled too. “This thing’s hard to cut.”

“Ah!”

“What?”

“Oh, I got the order wrong... I think you’re supposed to hold the gills and cut open the stomach first.”

“Oh, come on!” he groaned.

“I’m sorry!” I said, apologizing again. “I haven’t cleaned that many fish before! I grew up in a forest!”

Grumbling, Captain Ludtink cut open the stomach so that I could remove the organs and wash the fish out in the lake. I made sure to get all the blood out so the meat wouldn’t smell.

Next, I filled the fish’s stomach with the oregano I’d picked earlier, as well as some of the garlic I’d picked days ago, since it’d dried by now.

Then I covered the outer surface with lots of salt and pepper.

When Ulgus returned with a large leaf, I wrapped it around the fish to prepare

it to be cooked.

I lit a fire, placed my pot over the flames, then put the leaf-wrapped fish in.

I decided to use the fish's cooking time to make a sauce with some sour, unripe raspberries. The recipe was perfectly simple—I crushed the raspberries, then added seasoning along with salt and pepper, and that was it. Whitefish wasn't extremely flavorful, so I hoped my squadmates would make good use of the sauce.

Once the main dish was fully cooked, my "Baked Giant Fish" meal was complete!

We ate off the large leaves instead of plates. Once I said a prayer, it was finally time to dig in!

I started by unwrapping my large leaf bundle. Steam wafted up from the fish, carrying the delicious aroma of herbs with it.

The fish's meat fell apart as soon as I stuck the knife in. One by one, I cut and served portions onto each leaf my squadmates held out.

I'd also prepared some toast made from the fluffy bread to satisfy those who preferred it harder.

I placed the fish atop a slice of bread and covered it in raspberry sauce, filling my mouth with one large bite.

It's so good!

The fish had no foul odor whatsoever, and the meat was nice and plump. The sweet taste of fat filled my mouth as I chewed, and the savory meat itself was accented well by the sour sauce on top.

I closed my eyes and savored all of it, allowing each of my five senses to function at their clearest.

Everyone else ate in total silence—a normal phenomenon when devouring something so delicious. We now had perfect proof of why this fish was considered legendary.

Together, we shared the most satisfying lunch.



THE squad hitched up our horses in an open area before entering the forest depths in search of horned toads. I stayed behind and waited with the horses so as not to get in the way of their mission.

Around me was a circle of holy water they'd left for me, ensuring no monsters could approach.

Vice Captain Velrey warned me: "If any monsters come for you, pour holy water over your head and get down on the ground."

"I will."

I had a small bottle filled with holy water, the price tag of which nearly knocked me off my feet when I first heard it. It was almost a month's salary!

Of course, my life was much more valuable...but still!

Garr even lent me his extra spear. He was such a kind soul.

I watched everyone leave on their toad hunt with big grins on their faces like they were heading out on a picnic. Apparently, they got additional money for each horned toad they killed. This always led to them competing for the most kills.

No wonder they were having so much fun keeping count last time.

Since I was left there with nothing to do, I grabbed Garr's spear and headed to check out the surrounding area.

Though the horses weren't tied up, they were well-behaved and would definitely come running if I whistled for them. I felt safe leaving them where they were.

With that, I set out on a forest stroll to kill time.



INSIDE the woods, I found a bounty of nature.

Most of the trees around me comprised of evergreens. Their glossy leaves formed a thick canopy of green above me.

I even spotted some black pepper mushrooms right away. It struck me as a

good omen. So, of course, I picked them up for later.

A bit further down, I stumbled across some wild chestnuts. Once I'd crushed the surrounding burrs with my boot, I removed them to retrieve the nuts.

Even more chestnuts hung above me on the trees, so I prodded them off with Garr's spear. They rained down on my head, making me shriek. *Punishment for being so greedy!*

After finding a few leaves that'd serve as plates for us, I moved on to gathering sticks for firewood.

The bag on my back quickly grew full. I returned to the clearing where our horses waited and began to prepare dinner.

I started by boiling the chestnuts. Once they were cooked, I peeled off the outer skins with the intention of reusing them. By putting the skins back into the boiling water and adding sugar, I had a perfectly good batch of chestnut skin tea. The flavor wasn't much to speak of, but my grandma told me once that it helped improve blood circulation. I wanted the other members to drink it for their health, even if I didn't care for the tea myself.

As for the chestnuts, I let them simmer in honey. They were good to eat on their own or as a bread topping.

Next, I simmered some black pepper mushrooms, garlic, and chili peppers in olive oil. Dunking bread in this sauce would be another great way to eat it.

The main course would be a soup made with the head of the large fish we ate for lunch.

I started by kneading some herbs into the fish's head to help with the odor. Next, I chopped thin strips of black pepper mushrooms, garlic leaves, and oregano, sauteed them in the pan, then took them back out.

I then added the fish head into the boiling water and let it sit for a while, removing the foam that formed with my spoon. Once the water became cloudy, I scooped the fish head's meat out with my spoon and tossed it into the soup.

I knew its eyes tasted good too, so I scooped them out as well. I couldn't forget about the cheek meat, either.

If I was at home, I could dry the bones out and crush them into a powder that functioned as a flower fertilizer. But I had no way of doing any of that here, so I just buried all the remaining scraps in the ground.

Next, I added the vegetables I'd harvested into the soup and poured in a good few splashes of Captain Ludtink's white wine. Finally, I tossed in chili peppers to complete tonight's main course: "Giant Fish Head Soup." It was quite the effort, if I said so myself.

The horses made their way back toward the fire once it got dark. They were loyal creatures. Before the sun had fully set, my squadmates returned as well.

"I'm exhausted!"

Ulgus was slumped over. Vice Captain Velrey had a gloomy look on her face.

"....."

Garr was as quiet as ever, but his tail was hanging limp, so I knew he must be tired.

"I'm starving."

That murmur came from Captain Ludtink.

"I've been waiting for you," I replied.

They gathered around the soup pot for dinner.

I poured the soup into wooden bowls, since I'd started keeping the bare minimum of dishes with me.

Please eat from dishes like civilized adults, everyone! I would like to de-banditify the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

As soon as I said my prayer, I immediately took a spoonful of soup.

The giant fish made just as delicious a broth. It was a light and refreshing soup, but the subtle spicy kick warmed the body.

I was happy to see everyone enjoying their meals. I couldn't help but smile myself when I saw them all doing the same.

Well, all except for...

“Whoa! Wh-Why’s there fisheyes in here?!”

Captain Ludtink’s face was twitching as he looked down at the eyeball in his spoon. He really did have a sensitive side.

“Fisheyes are squishy and have a nice taste,” I explained. “They’ll help make your skin smoother too. When us Fore Elves have fish, the eyeballs are the most popular pa—”

“H-How idiotic!!” he growled. “How can you eat something so creepy?!”

“Why don’t you give it a try, just this once?”

“Absolutely not!”

I realized Captain Ludtink’s refusing to eat it must be a culture clash, even though I knew for a fact that it’d be delicious...

The fish certainly *was* huge. I guess I understood how the large eye was a bit creepy.

Ulgus and Vice Captain Velrey gently turned me down when I suggested they try it too. When I asked Garr next, I expected the same, but instead he nodded.

Once I brought the eyeball up to his mouth on the spoon, he chomped right down.

I watched him chew, focusing my attention on his tail to gauge his reaction.

It’d been sticking out straight for a bit, nervously anticipating this new flavor. But gradually, it began waving side to side.

He looked back at me and nodded his head. *He must’ve liked it!* I was relieved. Not that anyone else looked any less doubtful after seeing Garr’s tail-wag of approval...

I quietly vowed to enjoy all future fisheyes with Garr.

After that, I dipped my bread into some of the black pepper olive oil to try. The strong scent of garlic helped concentrate the black pepper mushroom’s flavor, and it had just the right amount of salt.

For a nice after-dinner treat, I ate some of the honey-covered chestnuts, which were a fresh, sweet palate cleanser.

Once dinner was over, I prepared chestnut skin tea for everyone.

They all drank from their cups with furrowed brows. Though they weren't fans, they'd reluctantly agreed to drink it once I told them how good it was for them.

After dinner, we were all free to do as we pleased. Garr began to meditate, Ulgus and Vice Captain Velrey tended to the weapons, and Captain Ludtink took out some liquor to drink.

Ulgus, he told me, didn't drink alcohol. Vice Captain Velrey didn't seem interested while on the job. I couldn't handle liquor either, and Garr was a mystery. As Captain Ludtink brought the bottle to his lips, but then stopped and shook it.

"Is it just me...or is there less in here than before?" he asked.

"I used it in the soup."

"You what?!"

I'd been the one walking around with that heavy bottle anyway. Surely, I was allowed to use a bit for myself. But despite Vice Captain Velrey agreeing with me on that front, Captain Ludtink still seemed unconvinced.

"All right, then," I said to him. "Sometime in the future, I'd be happy to share some of the Fore Elves' prized honey mead, passed down from generation to generation, with you."

"*Your* prized booze...?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"Yes. I hear it's quite delicious," I said.

Mead was the main type of alcohol we kept at my house. My father, older brother, and grandfather all drank it. All it took to make was honey and some natural yeast added to water inside a bottle. Sometimes, during the cold seasons, we added spices too. The ingredients were extremely cheap, so poor people could easily enjoy the drink as well.

"Do you prefer dry or sweet liquor?" I asked Captain Ludtink.

"I like it dry," he said.

“Noted.”

I’d managed to distract him from the liquor I had borrowed. I sighed in relief as I wiped the sweat off my brow. I had been quietly panicking ever since I’d realized that Captain Ludtink’s wine was actually quite expensive. That was probably why the soup was so tasty too.

“By the way, how did the horned toad extermination go?” I asked.

“We finished,” the captain said.

“You what?”

“We came across the whole swarm and took them out all at once.”

“Oh my gosh...”

I suddenly understood just why everyone was so exhausted.

“Well done, all of you.”

“We were lucky. We’ll head home tomorrow morning.”

With that, Captain Ludtink laid down and rolled over. I laid down next to Vice Captain Velrey.

Monsters were particularly active at night, so expeditionary squadrons weren’t allowed to operate then. We’d have to spend the night camping out again.

I let out a yawn. I was definitely ready for bed. Once again, I found myself staring up at a night sky filled with stars.



WHEN I first opened my eyes the next morning, I was startled to find myself face-to-face with Vice Captain Velrey. She was pulling me protectively close to her in her sleep.



“V-Vice Captain Velrey...” I whispered.

“Mm... Medic Risurisu. You wake up so early.”

“Yes, I guess so...”

With that, she began dozing off again, as if her blood pressure was low.

I looked around and saw Ulgus give me a wave as he yawned. He’d stayed up all night to keep watch.

I stretched and sat up, knowing I had to get started on breakfast.

Captain Ludtink and Garr woke up next, followed by a sluggish Vice Captain Velrey. Our breakfast consisted of bread and warm jerky. The fat on the jerky melted when warmed, making the texture a bit softer. It was delicious.

Ulgus groggily munched on some jerky too.

“Woow! Your jerky’s so good, Medic Risurisuuu!” he cried out, impressed.

“Thannnnnk youuu!” I said, imitating his drawn-out words.

“Flavor keeps coming out the more and more I chew it,” he noted happily.

“That’s true. This is jerky in its truest form.”

Until now, they had all been eating nothing more than dried-out meat. That wasn’t jerky.

We ate our jerky with the remaining soup from last night, and then breakfast was over. I washed my pot and the dishes in the nearby river.

With our mission finished in a day, the Second Expeditionary Squadron returned to the city in high spirits.



A week had passed since the last mission. On days when we stayed at headquarters, we spent all our time training.

But then we got some shocking news.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron was going to be awarded for our extremely swift horned toad extermination.

All the other expeditionary squadrons—about seventeen or so—gathered to watch Captain Ludtink receive his certificate of achievement and monetary reward.

He was wearing clean-cut formal clothes today and had shaved his beard too. Though he resembled a bandit less than usual without it, his naturally terrifying face didn't do much to change the thuggish impression he gave off.

I also learned Captain Ludtink's true age. He was only twenty! TWENTY!

I had assumed he was fairly young from the childlike way he acted. But I never imagined how accurate a guess that was! I also couldn't help but wonder how he'd made captain at such a young age. While I knew he was strong and possessed some solid leadership skills too, that didn't seem like enough of a reason to be made captain.

Most other commanding officers were in their forties, and my own village gave job titles based on seniority as well. But Vice Captain Velrey cleared up my confusion. According to her, Captain Ludtink apparently came from a prominent aristocratic family. Once he became a knight, he was given a fitting title as a result.

How can that head bandit be the son of nobility?! I was so shocked, I practically jumped up in the air. Then I thought back and remembered seeing the captain's occasional gentlemanly side.

But Captain Ludtink had plenty of problems of his own. I heard he was frequently on the receiving end of jealousy and envy, and that made me sympathize with him. But today, he received acknowledgment for all his hard work. I hoped this would make him feel more confident in the future.

Also, on this happy occasion, we received a brand-new squad member.

"Hello, Melly. Long time no see."

I suddenly found myself face-to-face with a strange man.

"Whoa?!"

He gave off a regal aura with his golden hair tied into a ponytail and his knight's uniform worn crisp and proper. As I took in his clear blue eyes and

bright smile, I was certain I'd never seen him before...until it hit me. This beautiful man with blond hair, blue eyes, and a mole near his lips...

"Ah! The Ferocious Ax-Wielding Prince!!" I shouted.

"Eww! Can't you pick a cuter nickname for me?"

It was Zara Ahto—the pretty boy cross-dresser who worked at the restaurant where my welcome party was held. I couldn't believe he actually joined the Royal Order again.

When he wore his knight's uniform, he really *did* look like a man—one handsome enough to earn a nickname that included "prince" in it.

Although he had also looked just like a pretty girl when I'd met him at the restaurant... It was deeply mysterious how he could look so attractive either way.

"What about your restaurant job?" I asked.

"I've just gotten so many marriage proposals lately," he sighed. "It was starting to get annoying."

"Oh... Goodness..."

I understood why, with hugs as tight as the ones he gave, people might mistakenly think he was interested in them. It might be fair to say he was simply reaping what he sowed...

But I could only cock my head in confusion upon learning he was our new squadmate. I remembered him saying he'd only be joining us if I won over his tastebuds.

"Oh yes, of course! I'm only joining on a trial basis," he said when I brought that up.

He told me he'd been requested by many different squadrons, so he was going to join them temporarily until he found one he liked. Lots of units were after him.

"You said you're good at 'expedition cooking,' right? If your cooking is as good as you say, then I'll gladly sign up for real."

“I-I see...”

Conveniently enough, it was mission time once again. We were planning to travel today to a prairie an hour away for more monster exterminating.

“Well, I’ll be looking forward to your cooking, Melly,” Zara said cheerfully.

He shot me a wink, which made me unintentionally cry out “Urk!” I suddenly felt like I had a lot of responsibility on my shoulders.

I then heard the morning bell ring, so we hurriedly headed to Captain Ludtink’s office.

All the members stood in a line. The captain called Zara forward and introduced him.

“This is Zara Ahto, our new temporary member. We don’t know if he’ll be joining us permanently yet.”

“I look forward to working with you lot!” Zara said.

Vice Captain Velrey gave a round of applause, Ulgus smiled awkwardly, and Garr showed no reaction. I decided to clap lightly and smile, though I felt my lips twitching.

After our morning meeting, we began to prepare for our expedition.

I checked to be sure I had all my medical supplies, filled a bag with food from the storage shed, and slung it over my back. This time, I hung the pot from my saddle first and managed to mount my horse successfully.

We regrouped and departed for the prairie.

The members of the Second Squadron each raced gallantly on their horses. I did whatever I could to keep up.

Just like before, we ended up stopping alongside a lake for an afternoon break.

I lit a campfire, boiled some water, and made tea for us all to enjoy. There were few things more blissful than dunking biscuits in a cup of sweet black tea.

Zara was washing his face in the lake, so I brought him a towel. He smiled at me.

“Thanks, Melly.”

“You’re welcome.”

He folded it up neatly to return it to me. I couldn’t help but see it as another example of his feminine side. Apparently as the youngest child in his family, he was heavily influenced by growing up alongside five older sisters.

“I’ve always liked cute things and frilly clothes ever since I was a kid,” he explained. “But my parents didn’t mind at all. They let me do as I pleased as long as I didn’t skip out on my studies.”

It sounded like he grew up comfortably with a laid-back family.

“And that’s how I ended up like I am today,” he finished.

“I’m actually jealous... My village has very strict ways of life we all have to abide by. Anyone who doesn’t conform is branded a nuisance.”

“You must’ve had it rough, Melly.”

“I did. But I’ve had lots of fun and freedom ever since I came to the capital... It makes me glad I was brave enough to leave the elven forest.”

“Is that right?”

Zara reached out to stroke my hair. This was much more embarrassing to endure while he was dressed in knightly attire, so I couldn’t help but stare off in the distance.

“Oh, that’s right!” He suddenly began to rummage around in his bag. “Here, Melly. This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“They’re walnuts from the forest. I’ve been keeping them on me as an emergency snack.”

“That’s very cute wrapping paper.”

“Right? I thought it’d be a nice way to boost morale.”

“That’s always important to consider.”

“I knew you’d understand, Melly! I’m glad you get me.”

I unwrapped the flower-patterned paper to see a heap of roasted walnuts. With his permission, I didn't hesitate to dig right in.

"What do you think?"

"They're wonderful!"

I didn't like to overeat, but forest walnuts were very nutritious. They helped support the muscular and nervous systems, promoted anti-aging, and cleared up skin problems. It was a wonderful choice for an emergency snack.

Zara popped one into his mouth. "Oh, shoot... These are kind of bitter."

"Are they?"

The walnuts from the elven forest were much more bitter than these. The taste didn't bother me at all, but I couldn't say the same for Zara.

"Then why don't we candy them?" I suggested.

"You can do that?" he asked.

"Absolutely. It's very simple."

When our walnuts were too bitter to eat, we roasted and candied them for a more palatable treat. I took out a small pot and added water and sugar. Once I set it over the fire and the water began to bubble, I waited for the sugar to dissolve and turn amber, telling me it was time to add the walnuts. I finished by pouring some honey over them, and with that, they were ready to eat.

I piled the candied walnuts onto a large leaf the size of my hand. After they dried for a while, they would turn nice and crisp.

I then washed the pot and drained the water, figuring when I was done that the walnuts must've cooled by now.

"Would you like to try some?" I asked Zara.

"I would love to."

The walnuts' surface was covered in a crispy caramel. Their sweet scent was nice and pure—exactly what I'd expect from sugar and honey purchased in the capital. Zara's forest walnuts combined with them to make the perfect flavor combo.

They were so tasty, I reached up to clutch my cheeks.

“Did you like them?” I asked Zara.

“I did! You’re a genius, Melly!”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

We began chatting enthusiastically about other kinds of sweets. Zara told me about a shop in town where I could buy caramel pies filled with crispy nuts inside.

“Wow, they sound so delicious!”

“Right? We should totally go there sometime!”

“Really?”

“Of course! Guys don’t like going into those cutesy stores alone, anyway.”

“Oh, I see.”

I felt like he’d get away with it just fine, but I kept my lips sealed.

“Good. You look a lot happier now.”

“What do you mean?”

Zara told me he’d given me walnuts in the first place because I seemed upset. Apparently, I’d grown emotional talking about my village, which caused him to worry about me.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “I appreciate your concern.”

“It’s perfectly fine. Our squadmates can be so rough and insensitive sometimes, right? I’ve been worried about you, since you seem like a sensitive girl, Melly.”

I couldn’t bring myself to flat out deny it.

I’m sorry, everyone...

After we rested a while longer, it was time to get going again, and we arrived at the prairie in no time. Together, we went over the mission outline again.

“That’s the gist of it,” Captain Ludtink said. “Let’s get out there and crush some monsters. Medic Rabbit, you can—”

“Hold it! You can’t seriously call her that, Captain!” Zara suddenly interjected. “She’s not a rabbit. She’s Medic Risurisu!”

He stepped right in to warn the captain about his way of speaking to me. His pure-hearted kindness almost made me cry.

Captain Ludtink mumbled an uncomfortable “Sorry” in apology. From then on, he began using my proper name and title.

It’s fine, I thought, as long as you understand now. As long as you understand.

I exchanged a brief glance with Zara, nodding my head in gratitude, and we both grinned at each other.

With that, I was left alone to hold down the fort again. I knew I’d need to go by horse this time if I wanted to explore the prairie.

Garr even lent me his extra spear again and I gratefully accepted. *He’s so kind!*

After I saw the others off, I mounted my horse and set off to look for cooking ingredients. I needed to impress Zara with tonight’s dinner, so I felt an undeniable responsibility to step up and provide for him.

But this was just an open prairie. There were far fewer plants than what I’d found in the forest.

This was supposed to be “expedition cooking,” so I wanted to avoid using the ingredients I’d brought along as much as possible. But I could make something delicious so long as I had good ingredients. There was no doubt about that.

My horse and I trotted around until we came across a river.

I looked closely at the water, wondering if I could nab any fish, when I found something unexpected instead. “Braaah, braaah,” came a cry reminiscent of a three-horned cow.

“Th-That’s...!”

It was a frog as big as the palm of my hand! It was called a mountain frog!

Their unique ribbit sounded just like a cow’s mooing. And fortunately, they were also edible. I found these frogs sometimes when I visited water sources during my forest strolls. They were a valuable source of protein and tasted good

too—not unlike chicken.

The others would be shocked to hear they were eating frogs, but they'd never know better if I didn't tell them. The meat was basically just chicken!

I quietly crept up to the mountain frog as it sat on a river rock, reaching out toward it. Frogs could easily escape if they wanted to, so I knew I only had this one shot. With my heart pounding in my ears, I waited for the right moment... and scooped the frog up in my hand.

“Woo-hooooo!!”

“BRAAAH!!”

I swooped it up and dropped it in my pouch, closing it up swiftly.

My hunt was successful. I threw my fist up in the air, basking in the feeling of victory.

The slimy feeling of its skin wasn't very appetizing, but that would change once I cleaned it. I quickly slaughtered it, stuck my knife into its back, removed the organs, and washed its body while draining the blood at the same time.

One frog down.

I'd need enough frogs for everyone if I wanted my squadmates to feel full. Luckily, I could hear more croaking around me. I might really be able to catch six frogs if I kept at it!

Placing the cleaned frog back in my pouch, I hitched it to my horse's saddle. With Garr's spear readied in my hand, it was time to return to the hunt.

I quieted my breathing and listened closely.

With creeping, quiet steps, I snuck up to the sound of frogs croaking and swiftly snatched them up from their rocks.

I repeated this strategy along the river again and again.

While I was motivated to capture enough frogs for all my squadmates, things didn't go smoothly. Because sadly...

“Eek!!”

I slipped on a rock and fell straight into the river. Naturally, I was soaked from

head to toe.

I was lucky to have landed in a shallow part, but I banged my body pretty badly on the rocks when I hit the ground. I could feel a cut on my face too.

Ouch. This definitely hurts!

I retrieved the spear from the river, returned to my horse, and picked up a bag.

Thankfully, the river I landed in was clean. If it'd been muddy or murky, I probably would have reeked for the rest of the day. The water's temperature wasn't too cold either due to the area's warm climate. I could only shudder at the thought of what it might feel like to fall into an icy river.

I looked around to see if anywhere seemed particularly private, finally choosing a large boulder to hide behind to change my clothes. As I dried off my hair, I began shivering more and more until my teeth were chattering. Despite the warm temperature, with my body soaking wet, I was still at risk of catching a cold. I needed to change quickly.

As soon as I took off my overcoat, something fell off the top of my cap and landed with a splat.

"Whoa! Wh-What...?!"

Apparently, a fish from the river had gotten into it. I gratefully accepted this gift from above. As soon as I realized my fall hadn't been for nothing, my mood improved exponentially.

I undid my braid, wrung the water out of my hair, took a towel out of my bag, and wiped my body dry.

I couldn't believe I had to strip all the way down to my underwear! The nearby boulders looked like a good place to leave my clothes out to dry.

As for my cut, I covered it in the special ointment my village used. I had bruises too, which I massaged with diluted lemongrass oil to stimulate blood flow.

I had plenty of medical supplies at my disposal, making this a moment where I was truly glad to be a combat medic.

After my clothes had dried, I put them back on. My hair was still wet, but I couldn't sit around and slack off any longer. I had to prepare dinner for my squadmates.

I decided to braid my hair on both sides and pin it to the back of my head so as not to let my cold, wet tresses touch my skin.

As for lunch, I'd sent everyone off with bread and jerky to eat on their own. *I'll need to find the right time for my own lunch too.*

Once I returned to the spot Captain Ludtink had designated, I took some nearby rocks to pile up and build a makeshift stove. I then gathered firewood and lit it with a match.

Since I'd always tried to keep my stove's fire going at all times back at the village, I resorted to using a flint when I needed one. Matches were an incredibly convenient tool for starting fires.

My first step had to be making my own lunch.

The main course would be the fish I'd happened to catch out of dumb luck. I cleaned out its organs, fearing the risk of parasites.

While the flames stayed low, I stuck my fish on a stick and cooked it over the fire. I knew it'd taste great with herbs, but I decided to go with a simple salt seasoning for today.

The fish roasted for a few minutes until it had a nice char on the outside. I took some bread out of my bag to eat with it.

After my prayer, I bit into the fish.

The skin was nice and crispy with the perfect amount of salt. When I took a bite, I savored the slightly sweet taste of fat. I ate and ate until only the head and bones were left.

As for my fluffy bread, I poured a generous portion of honey on top before eating it. Bread covered in honey was a luxury we'd never think of eating in my village.

At that moment, I really felt like I could keep being a knight forever.

I kicked my legs and sighed, expressing my love for the sweet snack since I

was all alone. Before long, my belly was nice and full.

Next, I dug a hole in the ground to bury the remaining fish bones so that my squadmates wouldn't find out about my lunch, successfully destroying the evidence.

I spent some time sprawled out on top of the grass, resting my stomach, until the sun started to set and I knew I had to start on dinner. I sat up, stretched my muscles, patted my cheeks, and readied my mind. Then I retrieved the cleaned frogs from my pouch.

Frog legs were particularly plump and tasty; I couldn't wait!

I cut up three of the frogs, which would leave one leg a person if I served them deep-fried. That wasn't quite enough. But this was the tastiest way of preparing them, so I seasoned the legs and set them aside from the other meat.

As for the soup, I thinly skinned and sliced the frogs' upper bodies and included the heads too, of course. They'd never know what meat they were eating this way. After boiling half the bodies to remove any unpleasant taste, I seasoned them with lots of garlic, red pepper, and other spices. I then added black pepper mushrooms along the way, letting them all boil together.

I gave it a taste. The flavor of frog broth was strong, so I took the soup pot off the stove and replaced it with a smaller pot.

Next, I covered the frog's meat with the sweet basil I'd picked earlier, garlic, and olive oil, then fried them up together.

When an appetizing aroma started to waft into the air, I placed the frog legs in the soup. With that, the dish was finished.

The sky was already starting to grow dim. I lit a square lantern to illuminate my workspace.

The second dish was fried frog legs.

It was a very simple recipe. All I had to do was use a bit of olive oil and fry up the already-seasoned legs.

With perfect timing, the other squad members returned just after I finished up.

“Welcome back,” I greeted Captain Ludtink.

“Thanks,” he said, an exhausted expression on his face.

They informed me that, after all their hard work, they’d succeeded in killing the required number of monsters. We’d be able to go home in the morning.

“We finished up real fast thanks to Zara,” Ulgus said, and Vice Captain Velrey nodded contently in response.

“I’m always happy to help,” Zara replied. He gave a beautiful smile, not appearing fatigued at all.

As I looked at him, lightly holding on to a battle ax nearly as long as his own body, I couldn’t help but wonder just how he was so strong.

I knew they were hungry, but I had to inquire about their condition first.

“No one’s hurt, right?”

The last time they returned from battle, I realized as they sat around and ate dinner that they all had some minor injuries. They all told me that they were perfectly fine, but I still knew I had to apply medicine or else scars would form and their healing wouldn’t be as fast.

This time, I was sure to look each of them over before we ate.

The skin on Ulgus’s fingertips had grown rough, so I applied some moisturizing ointment.

Vice Captain Velrey had a scrape on her cheek, which I washed clean and put ointment on. Apparently, she’d been hit by a tree branch while walking by it. I wished that, as a woman, she’d be a bit more careful of her face.

Captain Ludtink had a cut on his chin, but it was just a nick from shaving his beard off. I couldn’t believe it; I’d been looking for battle injuries, but I covered that cut with ointment too.

Zara was uninjured. Unsurprising.

Garr’s fur was messy and unkempt, so I gave him a nice combing to help with that.

Once my medic duties were finished, it was time for dinner.

Zara volunteered to help me set up. I was impressed at the sheer speed and accuracy with which he set out plates, though since he was an ex-waiter, it made sense. I wished I could be that graceful myself.

I suddenly felt eyes on me. When I turned my head, I locked eyes with Zara.

“Look at you, Melly! That’s such a cute hairstyle.”

“Oh, right... Thank you.”

He was surprised to hear my story of falling into the river and getting my hair wet.

“Bodies of water can be really dangerous,” he pointed out.

“I know. I’ll be more careful.”

It was unexpected, but I felt gratitude welling up inside me to have someone worried about me. His words went straight to my heart.

“You shouldn’t go near them when alone.”

“That’s true. Thank you for the concern.” I tucked his warning away in my mind.

After that, I sliced the bread and placed it on top of our plates.

With dinner ready, we gathered and said our prayers.

“What’s for dinner today, Medic Risurisu?”

Ulgus was asking the right questions. I just couldn’t answer him.

“I’d like you to guess what kind of meat I’m serving you today.”

“You brought meat with you here?” Ulgus asked.

“No, I found it myself during the afternoon.”

“I see,” he said.

I turned to Zara to present him with my challenge. “Zara, if you can’t guess what meat this is, then please stay in our squad.”

He had already promised to stay in the unit if my cooking tasted good, but to be honest, I wasn’t too confident in that. So I presented an alternative condition instead.

“Alrighty! That sounds more fun.”

He accepted. With what appeared to be confidence, Zara squinted his eyes, gazing at the bowl to observe the meat.

“Let’s eat.”

At Captain Ludtink’s command, we all began to dig in.

“Ah! Whoa! That’s good stuff!”

Ulgus definitely liked it. Vice Captain Velrey was smiling too.

Garr’s tail wagged as he took bites.

“You can eat the bones too,” I said, “but please chew them well before swallowing.”

Mountain frogs had lots of bones, so I would’ve had to spend all night removing them if I wanted them out. But the bones gave the broth good flavor, so I left them in to stew.

“Do you like it, Captain Ludtink?” I asked.

“It’s good,” he replied. “But I can’t figure out this meat. It’s white like fish, but tastes sort of like chicken.”

“Hehehe!” I giggled.

Captain Ludtink didn’t know. I glanced at Zara. He was chewing the meat carefully, trying to reach a conclusion. He drank his soup and reached out for a fried frog leg next.

I picked one up too and bit into it.

The legs were nice and crispy, and they gave off an herby smell. The meat came off the bones cleanly, and with each bite, their savory flavor filled my whole mouth. Just like Captain Ludtink said, the texture and flavor were both somewhere between chicken and fish.

This dish was a favorite of an old man who lived in my neighborhood, so whenever I brought him the frogs I’d caught, he paid me a bit of pocket money. I’d only eaten fried frog legs once, personally. Despite being fried up in oil, they weren’t too heavy a meal. I really enjoyed it.

Zara ate cleanly, observing the leg's structure with each bite. *I cut off the frog's feet at the ankles, so he shouldn't be able to tell what kind of animal it is based on that.*

Every member of my unit cleaned their plates. I let out a sigh of relief. Then finally, I turned to quiz Zara.

"Did you figure out what kind of meat it is?"

"I don't have a clue!" he lamented. "I can taste a bit of the juices that come out when I chew it. But it's not very rich, and the aftertaste is nice and light. I've never tasted meat like this before in my whole life!"

I almost let out another chuckle. Not even Zara, who worked in a restaurant, appeared to have eaten mountain frogs before.

"But you said you went to the river," he continued, "so it must be something that lives around water."

My heart skipped a beat when he said that. It seemed I'd already given away the perfect hint.

"S-So?" I asked.

"Hmm... I don't know...maybe a rare kind of waterfowl?"

"Wrong!"

Just then, Vice Captain Velrey cheered, "Welcome to our unit!"

Zara smiled awkwardly and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Medic Risurisu?" he asked. "What kind of meat was it?"

"Mountain frogs!"

As soon as the words left my lips, a chill ran through the air.

"F-Frogs...?" repeated Ulgus.

"Y-You're kidding, right?" Vice Captain Velrey pleaded.

"What kinda joke is this?!" Captain Ludtink bellowed.

"I'm serious," I said.

All of my squadmates, aside from Zara, cradled their heads. *I didn't expect*

them to be so sensitive when it comes to good food...

“Looks like you got me fair and square,” Zara chuckled.

“Sorry to give you such a difficult quiz,” I said.

“I sure thought it had a lot of bones for a bird, but I never would’ve guessed it was a frog!”

Strangely, I was glad I’d managed to trick him. It meant Zara was now a member of the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

“But are you really happy with this, Zara?” I asked.

“Happy? With what?”

“Joining our unit.”

“Ah...”

Zara leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “As soon as I tried my first bite of your cooking, Melly, I knew I had to join your unit.”

My face turned hot as soon as he said that. He didn’t seem to realize how powerful those words were.

At that moment, I realized why he was so popular.



WITH Zara now counted among our ranks, the Second Expeditionary Squadron had a total of six members.

Despite Zara looking like a regal prince, he had an incredibly feminine personality, so our unit became a lot less stuffy altogether.

Thanks to him, some truly incredible things started to happen.

He warned Captain Ludtink to keep his beard trimmed, clipped Garr’s nails, and taught Ulgus how to be less sloppy when it came to cleaning the barracks. He also persuaded Vice Captain Velrey to stop pushing herself so hard in her training.

I was so deeply impressed and grateful to see him easily point out the things that had bothered me ever since I joined this squadron.

Each day was fulfilling. But then, one day, I noticed a grim look on the face of the person most pleased to have Zara with us—Vice Captain Velrey. It seemed she was in the middle of planning a welcome party for him.

She furrowed her brow, looking deep in thought.

“What’s the matter, Vice Captain?” I asked.

“When I asked Zara what he wanted to eat for his welcome party, his request was surprisingly difficult. I should have never asked him...” she muttered.

“What exactly did he ask for?”

“Meatball stew.”

“Why’s that difficult?”

She explained that out here, meatball stew was typically cooked at home and wouldn’t be available at any restaurant. And the few places that *did* serve meatballs covered them in sauce. There was nowhere in the capital that would sell a meatball stew.

“Hmm... Maybe he’ll accept some normal meatballs instead... But we’re the ones who urged him to join us. I *do* want him to get the food he specifically requested after all that,” the vice captain grumbled to herself.

I had no idea how determined she was to make this welcome party a success.

I didn’t want to stick my nose where it didn’t belong, but I decided to offer a suggestion anyway.

“Would you like me to make it?”

“Make what?”

“The meatball stew. I know how to make it.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

“Not at all. Oh, but it’d just be an extremely simple stew with meatballs. Do you think it’d be weird to use my home cooking for a welcome party?”

Vice Captain Velrey grabbed hold of my hand. “It’s not weird at all. That’s perfect! They’ll all love it!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, that’s good then.”

With that, I accepted the duty of cooking for Zara’s welcome party.

We discussed it a bit and decided to hold the party at Captain Ludtink’s house. I never knew the captain lived in a house all his own.

“I’ll prepare the ingredients for you if you write me a list,” Vice Captain Velrey said. “Captain Ludtink said his servants can help us if we end up shorthanded.”

“Thank you very much,” I said. But I started to get nervous, imagining the mansion he must live in.

On top of that, I was also worried about how easily I accepted this responsibility. My expedition cooking was so good since I prepared it in places where there was nothing better to eat.

But for Zara, I knew I had to give it my very best shot.

Captain Ludtink was going to pay for the expenses, so I started to think of dishes that would be the most enhanced by high-quality ingredients.



THE morning of the party arrived, and I headed out for Captain Ludtink’s house.

I’d been completely certain that he must live in a beautiful mansion. But instead, it turned out to be a charming little two-story house made of red bricks.

The small garden outside was home to a few beautiful flowerbeds and even a rose-covered arch. I was deeply surprised to learn the captain lived in a place like this.

When I knocked on the door, an old woman emerged. “Heavens, what an adorable young girl!” she said. “You must be Miss Risurisu.”

“That’s right,” I said. “It’s nice to meet you. Thank you for having me over today.”

“By all means. Please come inside.”

The old woman’s name was Maria. She told me she used to be Captain

Ludtink's wet nurse. She and her husband had moved in with him when the captain was old enough to live on his own.

"Master graciously invited us two old fogeys to stay with him."

So Captain Ludtink lives with this old married couple. Hearing old women talk about their lives always made me emotional, so I was practically on the verge of tears after hearing her story.

I hoped the captain kept treating her well from here on out.

Maria offered me tea right away, but I was here for one purpose—to get started on the cooking. I was already worried I might not be able to complete all of my many planned dishes in time.

When I explained all this to Maria, she smiled and offered to help me.

I really appreciated that offer, and though I felt a little guilty, I decided to request Maria's assistance.

I was going to start by making the meatballs. Captain Ludtink had given us a lump of boar-pig meat to work with.

"Goodness me, Mell! How amazing," Maria said. "I had no idea you could make meatballs out of meat lumps like that."

"Yes, it's much more delicious that way," I said.

"I'm sure you're right."

The cuts prepared at butcher shops were nice and even, but they wouldn't make for an interesting texture when eaten.

"This will be hard work," I said to Maria, "but let's do our best."

"Of course. The two of us can get it done."

I used a large cleaver to chop up the meat while Maria prepared the next steps.

This lump of meat was big enough to feed multiple adults, so just cutting it up was exhausting.

At one point, Maria's husband, Tony, arrived to help.

“I’m sorry to make you do the hardest part...” I said as he took over the cutting.

“Don’t worry, Missy,” he said. “I’m a gardener, so I’ve got the muscle for it.”

“I really appreciate it!”

My first impression of Tony was that he was a gentlemanly old man. But I was surprised when I saw how strong he was, easily slicing the meat up into strips.

The result was two kinds of minced meat—both finely ground and a lumpier consistency—that’d be combined to give the meatballs a nice chewy texture.

I took a large bowl and filled it with lots of spices that Maria had measured out for me. Next, I added grated potato, breadcrumbs, alcohol, salt, and pepper, then kneaded them all together.

Tony, Maria, and I all worked together to mold the mixture together and form nice round meatballs.

“This sure takes me back,” Maria said. She told me how she grew up in a large family where everyone came together to help make meatballs. She broke into a smile from the nostalgia as she rolled up the meat.

Looking over our work, I realized what a huge amount we were making. I’d planned to make ten meatballs for each person with some left over, giving us around 100 meatballs total.

I started to worry that we probably couldn’t eat them all.

Once we finished molding them, our next step was to fry them up in hot oil.

The meatballs simmered loudly as they cooked until their surface was nice and crisp.

We finished cooking the meatballs at the same time the afternoon chime sounded.

That could’ve been bad! My cooking was going right on schedule. But without Maria and Tony’s help, I definitely would’ve been running late. I thanked them once again.

“I don’t mind at all. I do love setting up for a good party,” Maria said.

“Me too. Cooking with you two was a surprising treat,” Tony chimed in.

It was a relief to hear them both say that. Maria suggested we take a break for lunch.

I’d brought some biscuits with me for a quick snack, but I was shocked to learn Maria had made sandwiches for us already. I couldn’t wait to dig in!

“I made them this morning,” Maria explained, “because I knew I probably wouldn’t have a chance to use the kitchen later. There’s a sandwich for you too of course, Mell.”

“Oh, thank you so much! I appreciate it.”

She was such a kind soul—ready to share lunch with me, a total stranger in her home. Her smoked meat, cheese, and vegetable filled sandwich was both colorful and delicious.

After lunch, we started up the stew. We used a large pot big enough to feed ten people, which Captain Ludtink fortunately already had on hand.

Maria, though, had apparently brought the pot from her own home. “We’re a family of ten,” she explained.

“Wow, is that right?”

“Yes, it is. We had six boys, so cooking could be a nightmare sometimes.”

I felt her pain.

Cooking for my entire family when it was my turn was a truly grueling task. The actual cooking part was hard, sure. But I also had to stop my little sisters and brothers from stealing bites and making a mess. A chill ran down my spine at the memory alone.

But I enjoyed my hectic home life too. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss them all very much.

“Is something the matter, Mell?” Maria asked.

“N-No, it’s nothing!” I wiped my eyes.

This was no time to get emotional. I rolled up my sleeves and got to work on the remaining dishes.

The town's clock tower chimed loudly, announcing the end of the workday.

The rest of the squadron would probably arrive soon. It was a miracle I had finished cooking in time at all, and that was only thanks to Maria and Tony's help.

The dining room table, which seated ten people, was covered with a butter cake, roast chicken, citrus salad, potato gratin, and baked fish. I even tried making canapés by covering the biscuits I'd brought with cheese and smoked meats. Captain Ludtink had prepared some alcohol for us too, and the colorful bottles added more vibrance to the table.

Just as we finished with the last of the preparations, the doorbell rang. I went to answer it for Tony and Maria, who were too busy to get away.

Whoever was here was definitely early. It'd only been ten minutes since the clock had rung. *Captain Ludtink's home is far from the barracks. No one could make it so fast unless they sprinted here.*

Maybe they finished up work early today. I opened the door to find...a beautiful young lady with black hair and a fancy dress.

She eyed me suspiciously.

"...Who're you?" she asked rudely.

That was *my* question. This beautiful woman was a total stranger to me.

"Are you a new servant?" she continued.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"What a relief. I always told him he should retire those elderly servants."

"No... I'm—"

"Was I mistaken?" She raised her eyebrow at me.

"Well, yes. I—"

She reached out and grabbed my wrist. "Hey, who exactly are you?" she asked accusingly. "What's your relation to Crow?"

"N-No, I'm just..."

Who is this woman?

Her criticism of Maria and Tony had already put me in a sour mood.

Maria suddenly approached from behind me. “Miss Marina!”

Apparently, that was this woman’s name; Maria was absolutely grinning at the sight of her.

“I haven’t seen you in so long,” she said to Marina. “I’m glad to see you looking well.”

“And how are you, Maria?” Marina asked in return. “Is your back doing any better?”

“Oh yes, absolutely.”

“I *told* you to get some new servants, didn’t I? I can’t believe you haven’t hired anyone yet...”

“Oh, we’ll get there eventually.”

“Nonsense! You won’t have your health forever, you know!”

It seemed I’d misunderstood. Marina was only worried about Maria’s health.

But her words had really shocked me since I didn’t know about their relationship.

“So, who’s this Fore Elf?” Marina asked.

“She’s Miss Mell Risurisu, a squadmate of Master’s,” Maria said. “She’s a wonderful cook who came here to help prepare for the welcome party.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry for the mistake,” Marina apologized.

She explained that she was Captain Ludtink’s fiancée. That was why she’d been so aggressive toward me at first.

Marina had brought some beautiful roses with her as a gift, which we placed in a vase and left on the table.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron arrived together soon after that.

Zara was so shocked to see he’d walked into a party at Captain Ludtink’s home, I guessed it had been a surprise.

Marina introduced herself to the others too. Ulgus was clearly jealous of the captain.

When Zara got a look at the meatball stew, he lit right up.

“Thank you so much, Melly! I never thought I’d get to eat this in the city!”

Zara told me he grew up in a very snowy region to the north. Once every year, his family ate meatball stew as a special treat.

It definitely *was* a difficult dish. I understood why restaurants here didn’t serve it. Even making it once a year at home seemed like a lot of work.

I could see a few tears in Zara’s eyes. I really didn’t think this meal would make him so happy, but I was certainly glad I’d put in the work. We filled our glasses and toasted to him joining our squad.

I started with the meatball stew.

The meat we worked so hard to grind up was nice and plump. Each time I chewed on a meatball, the juices from inside filled my mouth. It tasted perfect alongside the rich stew we’d made with Captain Ludtink’s expensive wine.

I nodded my head with each bite, one after another.

Zara’s expression was already plenty telling. But just to be safe, I asked him, “How is it?”

“Thank you!” he cried. “It’s delicious...”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I smiled.

Zara’s satisfaction was a weight off my mind.

Everyone else agreed the soup was a success. The more they drank, the livelier things got.

Feeling in high spirits, Captain Ludtink broke out into song. Marina—equally drunk as the captain—started to play the dining room piano, but they were singing and playing completely different songs, resulting in pure chaos. Vice Captain Velrey couldn’t hold in her laughter. She appeared to be the happy kind of drunk who giggled all throughout the night.

Garr scarfed down the butter cake with glimmering eyes and a constantly

wagging tail. I didn't know he'd had such a sweet tooth all this time. He was actually quite adorable. *Like a puppy!* I figured he must be drunk too.

Ulgus was bawling as he listened to stories from Maria and Tony. This was confusing, since he didn't drink, but it seemed he just really loved his own grandparents. If that was the case, I understood his tears.

Zara had been clinging to me the entire time, never letting me go a moment without gushing in my ear.

"Mellyyy! Thank you sooo much! I love you!"

He's a bit troublesome when he's drunk... I simply said things like "I know, I know," to placate him.

"I'm so happy to be in your unit!" he cheered.

These words caused the rest of the squad to start echoing his sentiments.

Captain Ludtink stopped singing. He looked at me, a completely serious expression on his face.

"Listen up, Risurisu," he said. "The knights in our order like to headhunt from other units. Don't you *dare* join any of them, you hear me?"

Vice Captain Velrey agreed. "He's right. I'd be lonely without you, Medic Risurisu," she said.

Garr approached me next, giving a deep bow of his head. I returned the gesture.

Ulgus followed suit. He fell to one knee in front of me and lowered his head. Figuring he wanted his head scratched, I gave his hair a nice ruffling. His face turned bright red and he cried out, "No, not that!" I realized he was here for a different reason.

"Your cooking is so amazing, Medic Risurisu," he said. "You're super good at treating injuries! My cuts don't sting in the bathtub at all anymore. So, um... please continue to take good care of us."

As the squadron's only other sober member, he managed to express his thoughts far clearer.

Zara had one more thing to say after that.

“*We’rez* gonna get married!” he cried.

“No, we’re not,” I said emphatically.

“Whaaat?!”

As I casually swept Zara’s ridiculous statement under the rug, I decided to express my gratitude for everyone too.

“Um...I know I don’t have much experience, but I appreciate everything you do for me too.”

Once the words left my mouth, I felt my heart ache. These people *needed* me. I had my own place with them. When those thoughts hit me, I was so happy...I nearly started to cry, so I did my best to hold the tears in.

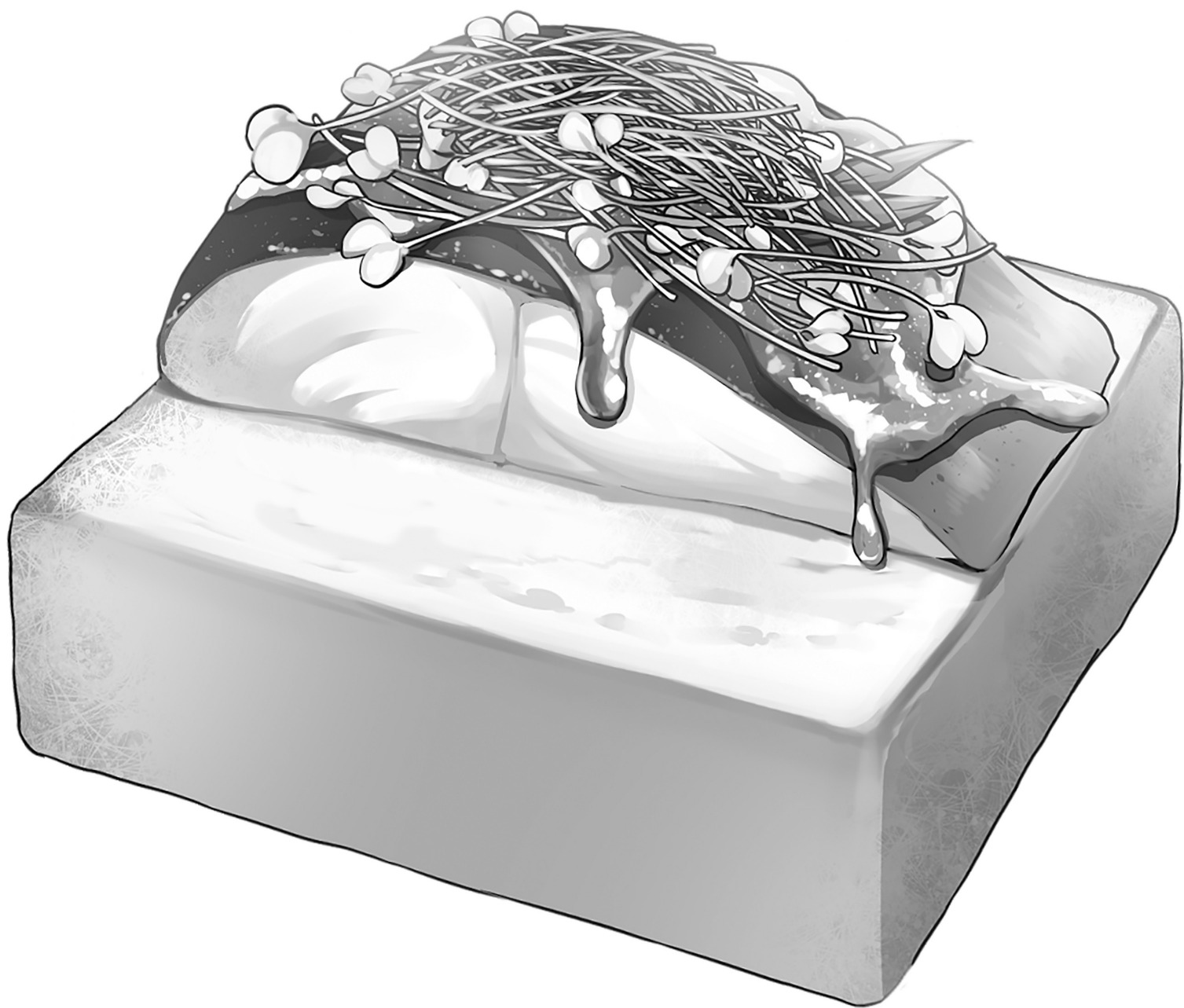
I hoped to keep making delicious foods for the rest of my squadmates to enjoy from now on.

Although my real role is a combat medic. I made sure not to forget that.

They say that everyone has a place somewhere in the world where they truly belong. My place turned out to be not the village I was born and raised in, but the Royal Order of Enoch.

Here were people who *needed* me, despite how useless I’d been made to think I was. Nothing in the world could make me any happier.

I was going to do everything I could to support my unit!



Chapter 3: The Capital's Famous White Scallion Rice Crackers

YESTERDAY, I was able to buy a large number of forest apples. Since they were currently in season, the apples had a perfect sweet and sour flavor.

I took two-thirds of them and boiled them in sugar water. I also made candied apples, thin-sliced baked apple chips, and soaked some other apples in liquor and honey.

Once it was all complete, I put everything in sterilized jars and stored them in our shed. The peeled skins could be used for liquor, so I didn't throw them out.

I filled another jar with the skins and added sugar, citrus juice, and yeast to start that process. All that was left now was to let them ferment for two weeks, and the liquor would be done! It'd make a great treat for Captain Ludtink to enjoy with dinner on our expeditions.

I'd make honey mead another time. But for now, I had to work with what I had. With ten jars total fermenting, I was looking forward to trying the apple liquor myself!

That afternoon, I baked ten rectangular sweet loaves using the leftover apples. They were excellent for combat rations as they would last up to three months.

But I hadn't even realized how many sweets I was making! Now the entire storage shed smelled like sugar.

Captain Ludtink's nose twitched as he entered the shed. "Won't this smell get on the jerky?" he asked.

"I-I...!" I'd been so focused on how I wanted sweets to eat while out on expeditions, I got carried away!

I needed to make amends.

But as I pondered what to do, Zara, listening to us from behind, offered a fantastic plan.

“Why don’t we stick them in the liquor cabinet hidden in the captain’s office?”

“What the hell?!” Captain Ludtink cried. “H-How do you know about that?!”

“I saw how the rug got scrunched up over that spot,” Zara grinned.

Captain Ludtink insisted he never once drank on the job.

“Why do you like booze so much at your age?” I wondered aloud.

“Right? He’s such an old grampa!” Zara laughed.

“I agree!” I chuckled as Captain Ludtink blustered an excuse about needing to be somewhere else and then stormed out of the shed.

The captain had been shaving his beard lately, making him look his own age for a change. But it didn’t help all that much, given his brutish personality. I wished he’d conduct himself like a proper knight for once.

“My, my!” Zara laughed as he called out after the captain. “Don’t you know more *nasty* rumors will spread about you if an inspector finds booze in your office?”

Having reached the...logical (?) conclusion, we moved some of Captain Ludtink’s liquor to the storage shed and had him take the rest home with him. It was a peaceful resolution.

After work, Zara invited me on a stroll through town to try food from various stalls. Ulgus and Garr joined us too. But Vice Captain Velrey told us she had plans to eat dinner with her fiancé.

“I didn’t know you were engaged, Vice Captain,” I said. Hearing that made me strangely sad. It reminded me of the time an older female relative I’d been close with got married.

But I wasn’t the only young person in our squad with a gloomy look on their face—Ulgus’s expression matched mine. “Are you serious, Vice Captain?” he asked.

“You didn’t know either, Ulgus?” I asked, turning to him.

“Nope...” he sighed while Vice Captain Velrey rolled her eyes.

As the two of us stood there, slightly teary-eyed, Zara wrapped us in an embrace from behind.

“Don’t get so blue, you guys!” he said. “I’ll buy you some yummy treats today!”

“Really?! You will?!”

“Yay!”

Ulgus and I made a miraculous recovery from our depression. Garr’s tail wagged slowly as he took in this ridiculous exchange.

Some food stands in the capital only operate at night. They were always packed with customers stopping by on their way home from work.

I decided to go out with the boys in my personal clothes rather than in uniform. I undid my braid and tied my hair up into a high ponytail. As for my outfit, I tied a ribbon around the collar of my shirt and paired it with a long navy skirt I made myself.

I looked at my outfit in the full-length mirror.



Yeah... Not great...

I sighed. *There's no way for me to look like anything other than a country bumpkin! I have to give up on looking stylish tonight...*

I also wore my knight's overcoat in case it got cold outside. Our meet-up time was approaching, so I rushed out of my room, making sure not to forget my shoulder bag with my wallet inside.

The three men stood out by the front gates. Garr, the tall wolfman, wore an elegant black leather jacket.

Ulgus wore a navy jacket with a stiff collar and a pair of black pants—surprisingly fashionable for him. Finally, Zara was in full cross-dressing mode. His long hair was tied back in a neat braid, and he wore a long dress with a fluffy shawl. At his core, he was so beautiful and fashionable!

And then there was me—the least stylish of all...

Not that I could do anything about that. I hadn't been paid yet, so I didn't have enough money to go shopping for new clothes.

When Zara spotted me, he raced up to greet me and proceeded to say something ridiculous. "Thank *goodness!* There you are, Melly! I was worried some man had stopped you to hit on you."

"Hahaha!" *That's the last thing that'd ever happen to me...* I simply chuckled, hoping to end the subject there.

Not only did Zara care enough to be worried about me, but he even told me my hair looked cute. It made me really happy.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked as we walked toward the food stalls.

"No, I'm all right," I said.

"Let me know if you get chilly and I'll wrap you in my arms!"

"Um...n-no, thank you."

"There's no need to be shy!"

"I'll think about it..."

“It’s a standing offer!” he smiled while I blushed.

The further we made it down the empty streets, the more people began to appear the closer we came to the center of town.

The street before us, basking in the orange glow of a sea of lanterns, was the capital’s most famous night attraction—the food stall district.

“Wow, it’s so beautiful!” I gasped.

“Right?” Zara said.

A delicious smell began wafting in our direction. Deep-fried bread, steamed buns, baked yams, three-horned cow skewers, white scallion rice crackers, herb-cooked meat, meat mochi, sweet and salty potatoes, and much, much more! Just reading each sign was already making me salivate.

Everyone was strolling down the streets, eating the food they’d bought.

“Wow... Incredible...!”

I was too overwhelmed to form any comprehensive sentences. All I could do was stare at the stands and murmur “Wow...”

“What do you want to try, Melly?” Zara asked.

“Oh gosh, um...any recommendations?”

“*Hmm...* How about starting with white scallion rice crackers?”

“I’ve never heard of those before.”

Zara explained they were made with thinly rolled dough covered in sliced scallions and meat sauce that was then wrapped up into a roll.

“Wow! That sounds delicious,” I said.

Ulgus and Garr decided to order them with us. Though Garr was a wolfman, he could safely eat green onions.

We stared at the iron grill as they got to work on our orders.

First, the cook poured batter on the grill and used the back of a spoon to spread it out. He cracked an egg on top of that, broke the yolk, and scrambled it. Once he let some white scallions grill on the empty space for a bit, he then

covered the batter with minced meat sauce and let that cook too.

Finally, he placed the scallions atop the cooked batter, wrapped it up into a roll, and the cracker was ready to serve.

Other cooks had been swiftly working on our entire order at the same time, since the stall had four grills they could use.

They served us our rice crackers wrapped in paper, and Zara paid before I could even get my wallet out.

“Oh, I can pay you back,” I said.

“Don’t worry your pretty little head,” he smiled. “It’s my treat!”

“Th-Thank you...” I said, trying not to blush again.

I guess he’s serious about treating us...

We kept walking as we ate so as not to block the road. I prayed in silence, then bit into the rice cracker.

“Wow! This is so good!” I enthused.

The outside of the cracker was crisp, but the inside was nice and puffy, and the crunchy scallions made for an enjoyable texture. The minced meat was finely ground, making each bite feel perfectly filling, while the spicy sauce complimented the cracker and scallions. It was so delicious, I couldn’t stop myself from jumping with joy. *Zara was right to recommend this!*

Our next stop was a steamed bun stand. Zara and I split one between the two of us.

“Whoa... It’s so juicy,” I marveled.

The bread was nice and fluffy. Splitting it in half made the meat’s juices seep out, dripping down onto my hand. The bun was still letting out so much hot steam!

I could see the meat was juicy enough to glimmer in the light, which made me curious about the taste. I opened my mouth wide and took a big bite.

The minced meat was nice and rich, full of savory flavors. Even the juice-soaked bun itself was delicious.

My half of the bun was gone in a flash. It was such a strange food, but it practically cast a spell on me, making me crave it more and more.

As I wiped my hands with a handkerchief, Zara seemed to notice something.

“Oh, would you look at that?” he said, bemused.

“What is it?” I asked, still coming down from my steamed bun high.

“Looks like we lost Ulgus and Garr somewhere.”

“Ah, you’re right!”

The last time I’d seen them, they were eagerly discussing how many steamed buns to buy themselves. The looks on their faces had been ones of true intensity.

“Well, this isn’t good,” I said.

“I figured this might happen,” Zara said. “So I told them up front that we can go our separate ways for the night if we get separated.”

“Oh, I see...”

I thought Zara might want to split from me too, but then he suddenly asked, “Alrighty, shall we hit up a dessert stand next?”

“Woo-hoo!” I whooped. I hadn’t expected a dessert after the other snacks! Zara told me we could find some nearby.

We bought deep-fried breads sprinkled with sugar and candied fruits on skewers. I always had an extra stomach available just for sweets. Zara also ended up buying me cream-filled bread too. It was all so deeply, *deeply* delicious...

Once our stomachs were nice and full, we decided to go home.

Ulgus and Garr were waiting at the front gates when we returned to headquarters. We hurried to our respective dorms, as it was almost time for curfew, ending our fun evening.

Next time, I’ll have to invite Vice Captain Velrey and Captain Ludtink along!



EARLY the next morning, I happened to run into Zara outside, so we headed to work together. But a group of strange knights stopped us in our tracks.

“Hey, you!” a young knight, who looked to be in his twenties, called out to Zara. “So *you’re* the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s medic, huh?”

He was small, much shorter than Zara. He and his pals paid no mind to my own reaction, directing all their questions at Zara.

“C’mon, what’s the matter?” another one of them asked. “I heard the medic was a Fore Elf. So that’s gotta be *you*, right?”

They kept pestering Zara. I realized they might be assuming all Fore Elves are incredibly beautiful, hence why they suspected him of being an elf.

Yeah, yeah, that definitely makes sense...NOT! How come they don’t notice his ears aren’t pointy? How on earth aren’t they noticing mine are?!

I gritted my teeth hard and tried not to shout out loud: “*I know I’m short for a Fore Elf, and my looks are average, and I can’t use magic, and no one will marry me!*” Saying all that in my head just made me feel empty, remembering how disappointing I was.

I’m a pathetic excuse for an elf...but that doesn’t matter right now!

I got curious about what Zara might do next, so I glanced up at him. He was staring down at the other knights. I thought he was going to clear up their misunderstanding.

Instead, he surprised me by asking, “You need something from me?”

His deep tone made the knights flinch. They must’ve thought he was a cross-dressing woman, I realized. I’d seen him cross-dress *as* a woman, so his knight uniform made him look super masculine to me.

But next to Captain Ludtink, something about his way of dressing made him look pretty and slender. He was still the same ferocious ax-swinging mean machine during battle, of course.

“Even *male* Fore Elves are this beautiful...?! ” one of the knights muttered as they kept ogling him.

I don’t know about that... I thought darkly. Most of our women were

gorgeous. But the men mainly worked as hunters or lumberjacks, so their physiques were much bulkier.

On the other hand, the male elves who traveled to the city were all slender, scholarly types. *So maybe that led to rumors that all Fore Elves are beautiful...*

The knights' eyes were wide, looking Zara up and down. I understood how they felt.

Zara once again asked what their business with him was. His voice was getting deeper, and I realized he might be getting angry.

"Ah, o-our captain wants to talk to you..." the first knight stammered.

"*Talk* to me?" Zara asked.

"Yeah, there's been a lotta talk about how the Second Expeditionary Squadron is performing a lot better since they got a new combat medic. So he thought maybe he could get you to join our unit instead?"

"Tell him I said 'no thanks!'" Zara said emphatically.

"But our unit's home to the Royal Order's most powerful members..." the knight replied, dumbfounded.

Supposedly, there were all kinds of expeditionary squadrons throughout the Order. I had first assumed every unit was made of the most elite knights, but once I'd joined the Second Expeditionary Squadron, I better understood how things work.

Expeditionary units were only given the bare minimum in terms of equipment. They were usually seen as a place you went to when you got demoted.

It was easy to imagine lots of transfers happened between them. But I'd absolutely no intention of changing units!

Zara glanced at me for confirmation, and I shook my head. He nodded and turned back toward the young knight, his face stern.

"I *said* no thank you. Go back to your unit. I'm not having this conversation. So tell your captain I said no, and don't try to bargain with me again."

“Y-Yes...I’ll tell him!” the knight stammered. “...Um, sorry to bother you...”

“Good. Just make sure he understands.” Zara gave them one last intimidating smile. Somehow, I felt he was...used to settling conflicts this way.

The young knight and his group quickly scampered away. Zara let out a big sigh. I felt guilty. *It’s my fault he got roped into this whole situation!*

“Um, I’m sorry tha—” Just as I tried to start my apology, Zara suddenly wrapped me in his arms. He was squeezing me so tight, I involuntarily cried out “Grah!”

“Ah, Melly, I’m so sorry!” he cried as he instantly let go of me.

“I-It’s all right...” I said. I apologized to him again and thanked him for handling it.

“It’s gonna be just fine now,” Zara said. “I just won’t let anyone take *my* Melly away from me!”

“Uh...right...” Him saying “*my* Melly” definitely made me wanna say more, but I decided to drop it.

Zara stayed angry after that—angry enough to report the incident to Captain Ludtink during our morning meeting. I was sure the captain would simply laugh it off, and that’d be the end of it.

But instead, his eyes went wide, and his face morphed into a terrifying bandit’s! *Your face is scary as ever, even without a beard... No, wait, now’s not the time for that!*

“They’re headhunting from *our* unit?!” he said in disgust, clicking his tongue. But he wasn’t the only one who reacted.

“How dare they? This is unacceptable,” Vice Captain Velrey said, her voice unusually angry. “We can’t just let it slide.”

At that, Ulgus and Garr nodded their heads.

“Now that I think about it,” the vice captain went on, “you’ve been harassed on your way here from the women’s dorm, haven’t you, Medic Risurisu?”

“And you said someone stopped you to talk to you the other day too, right?”

Ulgus asked.

“Oh no!” Zara cried. “Melly, what did they say to you?!”

“Ah, u-um...” I stammered. “He just said he’d give me some sweets if I talked to him in the cafeteria.”

“He did *what*?!” Zara and Vice Captain Velrey shouted in unison.

This knight had been holding a baked good wrapped in cutely patterned paper. As much as I wanted to eat more sweets from the bakeries in town, my parents had taught me never to follow strangers, especially if they offer sweets. So I refused him.

“We have to *do* something about the path from the dorms to the barracks...” Captain Ludtink said. He and Vice Captain Velrey then began murmuring something to each other.

“Melly, why don’t you come live with me instead?” Zara suddenly said brightly. “We can walk to work together every single day!”

“Huhhh?!” Just as I was about to reject his offer, Captain Ludtink ended up latching onto it.

“Good thinking,” he said simply. “You’ll live with Zara now.”

“Wha— Whaaaat?!” I cried. “I—I don’t think that’s such a good idea...”

“I can’t allow my unit to lose its medic,” the captain replied simply. When I pointed out that *he* was the person who made those decisions, he quickly replied that it wasn’t so. “I can’t do anything about it if the personnel department demands a change, much less if you request it yourself,” he said.

“But I’m not going to do that!” I protested.

“You never know for sure,” he said. He seemed fearful I might leave on the spot if someone offered me a better deal.

“You’re saying...you don’t trust me?” I asked softly.

“No, it’s not that,” he sighed. “Our unit doesn’t get the best treatment.”

He explained that if I ended up hearing about how other units were treated, it was completely reasonable to think I might have a change of heart.

“Maybe it’s selfish to keep you here,” he admitted. “You’d probably have an easier job in another unit. But we *need* you, Risurisu.”

“Captain Ludtink...” No one in my village had ever acknowledged my hard work like this before. His words made me very happy.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron accepted me and said they *needed* me. Being told that reminded me of my determination to keep working alongside them.

I was about to say as much, but then the captain suddenly said, “So we’ll use Zara as bug repellent! Risurisu, you’ll be living with him so that no one pesters you on your way to and from work.”

“E-Excuse me?”

“Just leave it to me, Melly!” Zara said with a smile.

I tried to argue the point with them, but they refused to listen.

“I live in a two-story house,” Zara explained. “You can *totally* use one of my empty rooms upstairs. I promise not to go up there!” He said he would even cook breakfast and dinner for me.

I could hardly believe my ears. “Um... Why are you doing all this for me?” I asked.

“Because I’m worried about you,” he said softly.

I didn’t feel totally comfortable living alone with a man. But as it turned out, Zara already had another roommate. “Don’t worry! You won’t be the only girl there,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, okay...” *As long as there’s other girls there, I think it’ll be all right...*

I decided to wait and give him my answer another day.



ONCE my afternoon break had arrived, I decided to make sweets as an apology for worrying the other members that morning. I purchased my ingredients at the cafeteria—eggs, wheat, three-horned cow milk, and butter. Today’s treat would be pancakes. I went to the small kitchen of the barracks

and lit the stove.

First, I separated the egg whites from the yolks. I then mixed the yolks into some wheat flour, stirred in milk and butter, added sugar to the egg whites, and whisked them together.

When the egg whites turned nice and fluffy, I added them to the yolk and wheat mixture and mixed it all together with a wooden spatula.

After that, I dropped some butter into a hot pan and ladled pancake batter on top of it. I listened for the familiar sizzling sound, and when the time was right, I flipped each pancake over. Their backs were a perfect golden-brown color.

I'd made sure to whip the egg whites an extra-long time, so the pancakes turned out perfectly thick and fluffy!

On each plate, I stacked three pancakes into a pile. It was a lot of food, but the pancakes themselves were very airy, so I imagined it wouldn't be too filling.

I added my candied apple slices from before as a topping for Zara, Vice Captain Velrey, and Garr, who all loved sweets. Captain Ludtink didn't care for sweets, so I seasoned his pancakes with black pepper and set a fried egg on top.

I called everyone into the breakroom, away from their respective tasks. They were all shocked to see pancakes waiting for them.

"Wow! What brought this on, Medic Risurisu?" Ulgus asked.

"I felt bad about worrying everyone this morning..." I explained.

"But you didn't do anything wrong, Melly," Zara said.

"He's right," Vice Captain Velrey said kindly. "We are worried about you, but that's what friends do."

Zara... Vice Captain Velrey... Even Garr shook his head from side to side, as if he was saying not to let it get to me.

"Thank you, everyone..." I said, trying not to let my voice get too emotional.

But since I'd already made the pancakes, I still wanted them to enjoy the treat. I told everyone to dig in, and they agreed since they were all starting to get hungry from the smell. We took our seats and began to eat.

I sliced into my pancake with a knife and felt the soft, airy texture, making sure to get enough sauteed apples on top of my first bite.

“Mmmm!” I leaned back in my chair and let out a sigh.

I couldn’t help but sing the praises of my own work. The pancake was faintly sweet and paired perfectly with the sauteed apples’ sour-sweet flavor. It dissolved in my mouth with each bite.

To be honest, I’d developed this recipe to be extra filling. It was the kind of snack I often thought of when needing to feed as many younger siblings as I had. Ulgus stuffed his cheeks with pancakes and declared gleefully, “Medic Risurisu, these are the best pancakes I’ve ever had!”

Vice Captain Velrey and Garr nodded their heads too.

“I’m glad you like it!” I said.

Ulgus looked over at the egg yolk seeping into Captain Ludtink’s pancakes, murmuring out loud how good it looked.

“Want some of mine?” the captain said, grinning.

“Wow, thank you!” Ulgus cheered. He happily dunked a piece of pancake in egg yolk and popped it into his mouth, looking pleased with the combination of flavors.

I knew just how perfect a salty snack could be after a sweet dessert. It was a laid-back, peaceful afternoon for the six of us.



TIME passed quickly, and soon, winter was upon us. We even started to see some snowfall.

As always, the Second Expeditionary Squadron spent our days training and preparing preserved foods for missions.

“It sure is cold lately,” I remarked to Garr as we were engaged in the simple task of crushing up walnuts and other nuts with a mallet.

Just then, I heard footsteps off in the distance. I had a hunch who they belonged to.

“Is that Captain Ludtink?” I asked Garr. He nodded, informing me I’d guessed correctly. The door opened a moment later. “Welcome back, Captain Ludtink,” I said as he entered.

“...Thanks,” he said glumly. His face looked distinctly gloomy, given he’d just returned from a meeting. He let out a dramatic sigh once he reached the breakroom.

I was too busy to ask him what was wrong, so I ignored it for now. The sounds of nut-cracking filled the room until the captain let out yet another sigh.

Garr and I continued smashing nuts in bags with our wooden mallets. I’d roasted them pretty crisply, making them tough and hard to crack.

“I think it might rain, Garr,” I said as the two of us gazed out the window. I knew I’d have to bring in the towels I had hung out to dry.

But when I stood up to do just that, I happened to make eye contact with a still very gloomy-looking Captain Ludtink. I couldn’t exactly ignore him anymore. Garr quickly offered to bring in the laundry himself, so I sent him off with a silent look.

With nothing else to do now, I reluctantly decided to ask Captain Ludtink about what was troubling him. “What’s the matter, Captain?”

“We got orders to head out tomorrow morning,” he sighed.

“Oh... That’s disappointing,” I replied. Tomorrow was supposed to be our day off. “But if those are our orders,” I continued, “I suppose we have to follow them.”

I was trying to encourage him, but it didn’t improve his grim look at all.

Is he really that scared to tell everyone? I offered to tell everyone myself, but he just shook his head and said he’d announce all the details at our evening meeting.

Then why does he look so depressed?

“Um...did something else happen?”

He muttered something I couldn’t make out other than “...-day.”

“Huh?” I turned my ear toward him. “I didn’t quite catch that, Captain. Could you say that again?”

“Tomorrow’s Marina’s *birthday*,” he said, sighing again.

“Oh no...” When I heard that, my face mirrored Captain Ludtink’s. His fiancée, Marina, was beautiful, but her personality was...rather intense.

Judging by how upset the captain was acting, I was pretty certain she wore the pants in their relationship.

They had most certainly made plans for her birthday. There was no doubt she’d yell at him along the lines of “What’s more important, your job, or me?!” I shuddered, even though I knew I wouldn’t be on the receiving end of her wrath.

“I don’t know...what I’m gonna do,” he sighed again. “Hey, Medic Risurisu... how can I make her forgive me for this?”

“Um...I don’t think I’m the right person to ask,” I said as diplomatically as I could.

In my village, wives did everything they could to support their working husbands. The men went out into the forest to hunt and then sold their pelts and meat to traders. They also cut down trees to sell lumber.

Every day of their lives was filled with necessary toil and hardship. There was nothing more important than work. As forest dwellers, we would have no lives at all if we didn’t work. So if your husband said he suddenly had work come up and couldn’t be there for dinner or a birthday, as a wife, you really couldn’t respond with anything other than “Oh, okay.”

That was simply the norm for us Fore Elves.

But people in the human cities—especially nobility like Captain Ludtink and Marina—could get by just fine without ever having to work. This probably meant Captain Ludtink’s news would land him in much hotter water than I was used to.

The phrase “What’s more important, your job, or me?!” was one I’d only ever heard from the love story of a knight and a young maiden that was popular in my village. Fore Elves would never value anything higher than work in the first

place, of course. But we always discussed how strange it was to imagine city folk fighting over something like that.

I would have never expected that exact scene to play out right in front of me!
City life sure does deliver...

As Captain Ludtink sank in his chair, his head slumped, I decided to make a suggestion.

“Why don’t you ask Zara for advice?”

“Zara?” the captain repeated, a little skeptical.

“Yes, Zara! He has the most feminine heart of any of us, so he might know what to do.”

The captain crossed his arms, then responded with a simple “Hmm.”

Moving on, I decided to ask the next question on my mind. “By the way...what is our mission?”

“We’re going to a mountain to find a nobleman’s son who eloped with his girl,” he replied, still sighing.

“Another tough job...” I muttered.

We’d have to go with the bare minimum of equipment in order to climb the mountain. *It’ll also be cold, so I’ll have to make sure my pack is stocked with nutritional rations. Chilly environments can steal all your energy, even if you’re not moving.*

Captain Ludtink also explained that the missing nobleman’s son had gotten separated from his partner on the mountain, although she’d been found and taken to safety right away.

“But why did he go to a mountain in the first place?” I asked.

“Sounds like his family opposed the marriage,” the captain grunted. “So he was running as far away from them as he could get.”

“I see...”

“The other expeditionary squadrons are taking turns scouring the mountain,” he went on, “and today’s their second day of searching.”

“Do you think he’s still alive?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Captain Ludtink sighed. “But we’ve gotta search till we find his body, at least.”

“You’re kidding...” I murmured.

“We have half a day to search the snowy mountain,” he groaned.

“We’ll never find him if he got caught in an avalanche...” I said.

“Doesn’t matter,” he replied gruffly. “Our orders are to keep searching.”

I’d been planning to bake cookies using the nuts Garr and I had crushed up today, but now I had to change plans. “Captain Ludtink, may I leave to do a bit of shopping?”

“Sure. Just be back in time for the evening meeting.”

“Of course!”

I hoped I could make it back before the rain started to fall. With that in mind, I grabbed an umbrella and left the barracks, racing from shop to shop to buy what I needed as fast as possible.

I bought cereal and dried fruit. Cereal was made by steaming, crushing, and drying grains. It was rich in fiber and very nutritious. And since it was so easy to snack on, it was popular throughout the city.

I had a plan for how to use it. If we were going mountain-climbing, we needed “high-energy food” that’d provide the squadron with lots of nutrients.

That food would have to be easy to eat and filled with nutritional ingredients. If possible, it’d be great to make something that you could pocket and eat on the go.

That was why I decided to fry the cereal, dried fruit, and nuts, then use honey to solidify it all into a kind of...edible stick.

These kinds of foods were usually sugary enough to make you shake and would definitely add a few pounds. But considering how grueling our job was going to be, we needed those extra calories.

Mountain-climbing could burn all your energy fast, so we needed nutritional

food that was easy to consume.

As fast as I'd tried to do all my shopping, it was pouring by the time I finished. I pulled my hood over my head, opened up my umbrella, and sprinted back to the barracks.

I informed Captain Ludtink of my return and immediately set up shop in the kitchen.

To begin, I combined the crushed nuts, cereal, and dried fruit with a pinch of salt, then mixed them all together. When I put them in a pan to roast, they began giving off a pleasant smell. I then set the mixture in a bowl, and once it cooled down, I poured in some honey and stirred it all together.

When everything was nice and consistent, I placed the mixture in a rectangular pan and baked it in the oven a bit.

With that, the bars were complete. I took them out of the oven, cut them into sticks, and wrapped them up in paper once they'd cooled down.

I ended up making thirty bars in total—five for each of us. *We'll only be working for half a day, so this is probably enough to get by.*

I kept prepping for the mission, since we were leaving early in the morning.

When I returned to the breakroom, I was greeted by Captain Ludtink cradling his head in his hands alongside Zara, who sat with his legs crossed.

"H-Hi there..." I said meekly.

"Good to see you, Melly," Zara said.

This mood was much too awkward to bear, so I was pretty eager to leave. But Zara started patting the chair next to him. I had no choice but to sit down.

"Did you hear, Melly?" Zara asked. "Captain Ludtink has the most *dreadful* luck."

"Ah, I did."

"You poor thing, Captain..." Zara tut-tutted. "Why not buy Marina some jewelry as an apology gift?"

"But all the jewelers have probably closed already..." Captain Ludtink sighed.

“Don’t be silly!” Zara said with pomp. “I’m sure they’d open up if the young master of the powerful Ludtink family showed up at their door.”

“But I don’t know what girls like...” the captain said.

Suddenly, they both turned to look at me.

“O-Oh no!” I said, putting my hands up in defense. “I can’t help you! I’ve spent my whole life in the forest; I’ve never even *seen* jewelry before! I-I think Zara knows *way* more about this than me.”

“Ew!” Zara sniffed. “I don’t want to go shopping for jewelry, just me and another man! I shudder to think of it...”

“Ya don’t say?” the captain shot back, perking up a little. “That’s exactly how I feel.”

“But...but...ummm, it’s raining outside!”

“Who cares! Let’s just get going,” Captain Ludtink said. He was fidgety, clearly eager to get this over with quickly. Zara smirked a little.

Well, at least someone is enthusiastic about this...

With that, the three of us were forced to venture out to a jewelry store together. Like the captain thought, it turned out to be closed.

However...

“Hey!! Anyone in there?!” Captain Ludtink shouted as he banged on the door like a ruffian.

Are you trying to make them think you’re gonna rob them?!

Zara flinched. “Knock it off!” he cried. “You’re not a debt collector!”

The captain, seemingly unaware of his own tone, furrowed his brow in confusion. But keeping Zara’s warning in mind, he tried again, this time as a proper nobleman’s son. Finally, he managed to force his way inside...or rather, an employee finally opened the door and let us in.

The shop was filled with rows of beautiful sparkling necklaces, earrings, and brooches. They all looked like works of art.

Zara and Captain Ludtink took in each piece, determined to find the perfect

gift.

Looking at them from behind, they kinda look like a couple who just started dating...! I blushed at the thought of it.

The clerk was staring at them with a strained look on her face—probably thinking the same thing I did.

The two of them took their time looking over the items until they finally picked out a nice necklace. It was a beautiful piece made with green gems.

In the end, there was really no need for me to have tagged along, but it wasn't for nothing. *At least I get to see a lot of pretty jewelry...*

I even started to wonder if I should get myself a simple brooch. I would obviously have to work extra hard to be able to afford one. As I gazed at all the pieces, Zara waved me over toward him.

“Hey, Mellllly~!” he cooed. “Captain Ludtink said he'll buy you a brooch!”

“Huhhhhh?!?”

I never expected a reward! I tried to refuse out of politeness, but the captain said he'd buy things for both Zara and me.

He showed me four brooches—a flower, a rabbit, a star, and a bird of prey. *They're all adorable!*

“You sure you don't want the rabbit?” Captain Ludtink asked. That was obviously what he wanted to get me.

I ignored his comment. *They're all so beautiful. I don't know which to choose...*

I was starting to think that none of them were right for me and that the captain maybe shouldn't bother at all. But Zara pointed to one of the brooches.

“Why don't you get the flower, Melly?” he suggested. “It'd definitely suit you.”

“You really think so?”

“Totally!” he grinned.

Captain Ludtink overheard us and told the clerk he would buy the flower brooch.

“Will you pick one for *me* now, Melly?” Zara asked.

Ah! That’s an enormous responsibility! But since he’d complimented me so kindly, I gave it some serious thought. In the end, I chose the brooch shaped like a bird of prey.

“That’s a subtle, elegant pick, Melly,” Zara enthused.

“That’s you, all right,” the captain grinned as he came over. “Perfect for a carnivore.”

“Oh my goodness! Ehehe!” Zara laughed.

Uhh...what are you two talking about?

The clerk returned with the brooches wrapped up in paper. Leaving with something so lovely in my possession was the last thing I expected.

Once again, I was motivated to do my very best at my job tomorrow.



BUT as motivated as I had been, when I woke up the next morning and remembered we were going to climb a mountain, that all went out the window. Today was supposed to be my day off originally!

I sank into my bed and groaned in agony. Getting up was too much of a hassle.

I’m unmotivated. Unwilling. Uninspired. I’ve got nothing left.

But time wouldn’t stand still for me to get on with it. So *slowly*, I dragged myself out of bed. Then my new brooch caught my eye from where I’d left it on my bedside table.

The wrapping paper was so pretty, I’d left it on for the time being. I decided to open it up and stare at it when we came back. *That’ll be something to look forward to, after all the work I’ll have to do today...*

I arrived at the cafeteria and was greeted by the old woman behind the counter. She gave me two pieces of toast, an omelet, and a bowl of soup. I took a seat and prayed.

Thank you for the opportunity to eat more delicious food, O Gods!

First, I tried the toast, pulling a jar of butter toward me and slathering it all over the surface.

Knowing I needed a lot of nutrients for today, I added another layer of butter, watching it dissolve atop the piping hot bread. I loved watching the light-yellow butter turn amber as it absorbed the heat. As much as I wanted to stare at it all morning, when I glanced at the clock, I realized I didn't have much time until our morning meeting.

I quickly scarfed down my toast. *No time to appreciate the flavor!*

Next, I cut into the omelet only for melted cheese to ooze out from the inside. I was shocked!

I never imagined cheese inside an omelet before, but I was absolutely certain it'd taste fantastic. I stuck my fork into the bite I'd cut out and watched the cheese stretch out along with it. I had to cut the cheese off with a knife before I popped the piece into my mouth.

Such a bounty of flavor... I was speechless. I closed my eyes, squeezed my fork, and basked in the moment.

Whoever thought of adding cheese to an omelet was a genius! As I pondered what other ingredients could be added, the clock chimed, signaling thirty minutes until the start of the workday. *Gah! Right! No time for savoring!*

I ate as quickly as I could and rushed out of the cafeteria as soon as I was done. The morning meeting was just about to start when I reached the barracks.

It was our eighth consecutive workday, and everyone looked slightly dead on the inside. Except Zara, of course.

I was definitely curious how that man always stayed so healthy and energetic. *But I'll worry about that later.*

The search parties still hadn't sighted the nobleman's missing son.

"So, this'll probably be a corpse finding mission soon. Eh heh heh..."

None of us laughed at Captain Ludtink's attempted joke, or whatever it was. I wanted to cry. This was just the depressing cherry on top my already lost day

off.

The captain explained we'd be traveling by carriage. *Well, that takes some of the load off my mind.*

With our morning meeting over, we wasted no time getting ready and quickly hauling all our gear outside.

Despite being big enough for six people, due to my squadmates' relatively bulky frames, the carriage felt a little cramped.

Garr especially looked uncomfortable as he curled up his extra-large body. I took a spot in the corner.

Zara sat next to me, with Vice Captain Velrey seated across from us. *A nice sight to look at, at least...*

At Captain Ludtink's command, the carriage took off. As I watched the changing scenery outside my window, I suddenly felt a pair of eyes on me.

Vice Captain Velrey was looking at me. When I met her gaze, she smiled softly. "Are you getting used to city life yet, Medic Risurisu?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "I'm managing well. Everyone is really nice to me, and my new life is full of so many more luxuries than I'd known in my village. The older female knights in my dorm are kind, and the cafeteria women always treat me like a friend. I have no complaints about anything."

"What about the future?" the vice captain asked. "Do you have any dreams or goals?"

"I want to save up enough money for my little sisters' dowries..."

Everyone turned toward me when I said that. They were all wide-eyed as they stared at me.

Then Ulgus suddenly spoke up. "Wait, you're not married, right, Medic Risurisu?"

"That's right... Why do you ask?"

"Well then, why are you saving for your sisters' dowries?"

"Because I want them to be happy when they're finally married, of course."

“But what about *you*, Medic Risurisu?”

“My...my fiancé dumped me.”

The carriage fell silent.

“If you’re gonna butt in, get the whole damn story, idiot,” Captain Ludtink whispered to Ulgus, nudging him with his elbow.

I can hear you, you know...

“Uhh...” Ulgus said, clearly trying to tread lightly. “How come he ended your engagement?”

“Because I had absolutely nothing to offer him,” I said flatly.

“N-Nothing? That’s not tr—”

“I have no money, no magic, and no skills to speak of...”

“Whaaat?!” he cried, shocked to hear what was expected of a good Fore Elf wife and mother.

“You can’t give up on getting married! That’d be such a waste,” he protested.

“Now that I know how nice city life is, I can’t go back to living in our forest.”

“Then why don’t you find a husband in the city?” Ulgus suggested.

“What man would be strange enough to want to marry me?”

“...He’s right in this carriage, actually...” Zara said, murmuring something I couldn’t quite hear.

Just then, the carriage lurched violently, followed by the sound of our coachman screaming outside.

As soon as the carriage screeched to a stop, Captain Ludtink shouted, “Monsters!”

I managed to stop myself from screaming. *Running into monsters before we even reach our destination. How unlucky! This is the last thing we need...!*

Captain Ludtink pulled out a long sword from underneath his seat and flew out of the carriage, Garr right behind him.

“Ugh! My and Garr’s weapons are stored in the pack strapped to the back of

the carriage!” Zara seemed annoyed as he followed them out.

“Medic Risurisu,” Vice Captain Velrey warned me as she followed him out. “Stay in the carriage until Ulgus gives you the signal.”

“O-Okay!”

Ulgus jumped out last with a worried look on his face.

I sat there alone. Then I heard the shrill cry of a monster outside. I stole a glance out the window. What I saw were the knights standing in front of a gigantic snake with two heads. It had to be sixteen feet long. Its scales were green to blend in with the forest, but its eyes were glowing bright red.

I clasped a hand over my mouth to stop another scream from escaping. Whipping my head away, I stared down at the carriage floor.

I’d never seen such a large monster before. My heart was pounding in my chest.

A male knight was driving the carriage, but I understood why he’d let out that scream when he laid eyes on the monster. *Actually, what happened to him, anyway?*

At that thought, I peeked out the window again. The coachman was slumped over on the ground. He didn’t *seem* to be bleeding, but I couldn’t tell if he was injured or had just fainted. Either way, I had been ordered to stay where I was until I received the signal. ...*I’m sorry!* I apologized to him internally for not being able to rush to his aid.

The battle didn’t seem to be going poorly at all. Zara slashed at the monster with his battle ax while Captain Ludtink fought off repeated attacks from its long tail.

No one wasted a single second. When the timing was right, Vice Captain Velrey and Garr struck the monster right in the heart.

Ulgus sent an arrow flying, and it soared like the wind, piercing the snake’s eye.

They were all performing brilliantly. But I was too nervous to watch them for long.

Suddenly, I felt the ground shake. The carriage rocked with a loud creak. I thought I might tip over from the motion, but I managed to brace myself by holding onto the windowsill.

When I looked outside, the large snake had collapsed. I sighed in relief and took a moment to... *No! This isn't the time for me to relax!*

I grabbed my medical supplies and readied them in case I had to treat anyone. Ulgus was the first to return to the carriage. "It's safe now, Medic Risurisu," he said.

"Thank you!" I said. "You were so impressive."

"No, no! I hardly helped at all."

That wasn't true. I'd seen it with my own two eyes. He was so modest; I wanted to learn from that side of him.

"I don't think anyone's badly injured," Ulgus said.

"That's a relief."

"But there might be a few scrapes and bruises."

"Understood."

By the sound of things, our carriage driver had merely fainted. Hearing that was the first real relief I felt.

Medically speaking, there was only so much I could do. Some squadrons had personal doctors with them, but there weren't enough for every unit. That was why I always prayed there'd be no major injuries whenever the others went to fight.

I stayed inside as I'd been ordered. After a while, the others all came back.

The driver, now awake again, came inside our carriage, switching places with Captain Ludtink just to be safe.

As the captain got the carriage rolling and rattling again, the other knight sat next to me, looking uncomfortable.

I set to work treating his wounds. As I did, he explained that, as soon as he'd seen the monster, he'd stopped the carriage and turned around to warn us. But

the snake had struck him before he could.

The driver didn't wear a helmet while holding the reins so his vision wouldn't be obscured. As a result, his head was all scratched up, and I could see blood underneath the tears in his leather gloves.

I cleaned his wounds with a wet cloth and slathered them with ointment once they were sterilized. With nothing else to do, I also stitched up his torn gloves.

"Sorry for all the trouble," the knight said. "I appreciate the help."

"It's no trouble at all," I smiled.

He made it sound like such a big deal. But I didn't *dislike* his response; if anything, I felt fulfilled to have done my combat medic duty.



THE carriage rattled its way further down the path. Nobody spoke, probably due to the stranger among us. I wrote up an examination report for him, since he fainted before we reached our destination.

He's still a bit spaced-out, probably from the blow to the head... The snake had also struck him in the stomach, and he was now showing signs of internal bleeding. I knew a doctor should examine him, so I wrote a note for him to be able to head straight back home.

On top of our other duties, combat medics were in charge of keeping watch over the knights' health and judging whether or not they were fit to carry out their duties.

After another hour, we reached the building that was being used as search party headquarters. The ground outside was covered in snow, making me break out in goosebumps. Zara said he didn't mind the cold, since he grew up in a snowy region; I was so jealous.

I stepped inside the building to see a flurry of knights in action. Captain Ludtink checked in with someone up front, who we all followed to a conference room.

Every knight we passed by looked completely exhausted.

Ulgus suddenly whispered to me, "Oh man...this looks like it's gonna be a

tough job.”

“Well, it *is* a mountain search party.”

In my village, women and children weren’t even allowed in the forest when it was snowing, since it was way too dangerous. *So why did this eloping couple go up a mountain during winter?*

The conference room was full of old men, every last one of them looking sad and discouraged. Half of them were knights, but the other half were men dressed in fancy clothes—probably the family of the man we were searching for.

On top of the table was a large map of the mountain. The places that’d already been searched were scratched out.

The commander of all our expeditionary squadrons explained our mission. Our group was going to search the base of the mountain by making one full lap around it. Though it sounded simple enough, the road was full of hills and dips, so it’d be very rough to traverse.

The most exhausted man there—the commander—addressed us. “I hope your wolfman’s nose and your Fore Elf’s ears will prove useful,” he said.

Wow...he included me alongside Garr. That’s a lot of responsibility.

The best of the expeditionary squadrons had already searched halfway up the mountain only to come up empty-handed.

“Even if we can’t find him,” the commander continued, “today’s our last day to search. We won’t be sent out here again until the snow’s melted.”

So we aren’t going to be searching for his corpse, after all... If we kept searching in this weather, it was very possible knights would start to die.

Captain Ludtink took the map along with some extra equipment. We were given studded boots, down overcoats, and hats that covered our ears...well, unless you had pointy ears like me.

I had to make do with a simple head covering. Our complete sets of snow-trekking gear included scarves, gloves, walking sticks, and a ration box too.

“This is half a day’s worth,” the commander explained as I subtly opened the

box. “You’ll be running out of energy fast, so be sure to keep filling up on food.”

Each box included snacks like chocolate, candy, and cookies. For just a moment, Captain Ludtink’s brow wrinkled...but then his expression became neutral again.

Maybe it’s because he doesn’t like sweets...?

“Ludtink,” the commander warned. “*Don’t* put your squad in any danger. We’ve seen two avalanches already, but luckily, no one’s been injured...so far.”

On top of that, the commander told us that mid-tier monsters called snowbears sometimes appeared on the mountain. There had even been an extermination mission ordered three years ago.

That’s not the news I wanted to hear! I hope we don’t meet any of those snowbears...

After giving us our mission outline, the commander ordered us to eat before we headed up the mountain. The older knights had cooked for us in advance. When I entered the makeshift dining room, I saw all the other knights eating their soup and bread with wide-eyed stares.

I picked up a tray and headed forward. First up was the soup. A large bone, meat still attached, was floating on the surface, along with a big clump of butter dropped in as a finishing touch. Next, I was given an incredibly fatty piece of roast meat, a round biscuit, and three boiled eggs. Finally, I took a jar filled with pickled veggies.

The attempt at picking foods strictly based on nutrients was glaringly obvious. Ulgus, who was sitting next to me, let out an “Ugh!”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I can’t believe how *bad* this is...” He was currently attempting to conquer the butter soup.

“You’re kidding...!”

I could understand putting butter in a rich soup, like one with red wine in it. But it felt like far too much in a lighter soup. Still, I knew I’d collapse on the mountain if I didn’t eat all this food. So, after mustering up some courage, I took

my first gulp.

“Urp!” I shuddered. *It’s awful!*

“See?” said Ulgus.

“Yeah...”

My face was twitching, but I soldiered on and finished my meal.

After lunch, I equipped the other items I’d been provided for the mission, and we headed toward our route around the base of the mountain.

The air was frigid and the chill breeze nipped at my skin. And, of course, my ears were freezing. *I really wish the Royal Order would provide some extra equipment just for elves...*

“Risurisu and Ulgus, tie yourselves together with rope,” Captain Ludtink ordered. Apparently, this was a countermeasure to prevent me from tripping and falling off the mountain along the way. I tied one end to my belt and Ulgus held onto the other end with his hands.

“All right, let’s head out, Medic Risurisu!” he said confidently.

“Okay!” I said. “Let’s have a good mission!”

“Just how stupid *are* you two?!” the captain cried.

It seemed we’d tied the rope completely wrong. The correct way was to tie each end of it to our belts to walk. We had been very close to climbing the mountain like a master with his dog on a leash.

After we had fixed our mistake, it was time to head out. The weather began to worsen as we traveled on. A strong wind swept past us.

“Sounds like a blizzard’s coming...” Zara—who’d grown up around snow—sounded a terrible omen.

Ah, I hate this! I don’t wanna go...! But I have to...

Since he was used to traversing snowy roads, Zara took the lead. Garr was behind him, followed by Vice Captain Velrey, Ulgus, and me. Captain Ludtink brought up the rear. If a battle flared up, Ulgus was to pick me up and carry me to safety.

We followed Zara and Garr as they carved out a path for us. The further we pressed on, the thicker the snow on the ground got.

The road was rugged and hard to traverse. But Ulgus helped steady me by pulling the rope, so I was able to keep up better than I expected.

With each step, I plunged my walking stick into the snow. As we plowed along, it crossed my mind that searching in these conditions seemed ridiculous.

After our first bit of searching, we took a brief break. Then we spent a longer period searching with a longer break after that. We kept on repeating that process.

Since it was so easy to take out and eat, the high-energy food I'd made last night came in handy.

The more we trudged, the more my hands started growing numb. Luckily, we found a cave nearby and we took shelter inside to rest.

The cavern, stretching through the slope of the mountain, was dark, damp, and warmer than the outside. Zara built a fire for us as I took out my pot and started to prepare.

"How about we all have some warm forest apple cider?" I said, trying to sound cheerful.

The alcohol will most likely cook off when fully heated. Probably...

When I pulled the jar out of my bag, Zara stared at it.

"Wait...did you make that hard cider yourself, Melly?" he asked, a little concerned.

"I did," I replied. "Is something wrong?"

"No... I just noticed you don't have a certificate from the Liquor Guild on the bottle..."

"Wait, does that mean it's illegal to make alcohol yourself?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Captain Ludtink muttered.

That was the first I'd ever heard of the Liquor Guild. Apparently, residents of the capital were supposed to pay them for permission to self-brew alcohol.

Homemade bottled alcohol was supposed to have a certificate from the guild displayed on its container. *I had no idea!*

“I-I can’t believe I did that...!” I said in shock.

“Don’t you worry. This ain’t the capital,” Captain Ludtink said, pouring the cider into the pot.

“...You can’t *ignore* the rule either, but these are extreme circumstances right now,” Vice Captain Velrey said. Even she wasn’t going to scold me. Garr pretended not to notice too.

“Wow, it looks really good!” Ulgus said, clearly already eager to get started.

I glanced at Zara and he just shrugged at me. *So he won’t tell anyone either...*

Still feeling a little guilty, I started to prepare the cider.

Forest apples help the body recover from fatigue and prevent bloating. I added powdered ginger to promote vitality as well as some honey for their throats. I mixed it all up with a spoon, and I started to smell the sour-sweet aroma before long.

I poured each member a cup and handed them out. Captain Ludtink raised his cup to us.

“This is our little secret, everybody. Cheers!”

We toasted to our little secret with our warm cider, then took our first sips.

Most of the alcohol had cooked off. The forest apples were sweet, but the ginger gave them a little kick. At the end of each gulp, there was a faint sweetness from the honey. It was a delicious way to warm up.



AFTER our break, we returned to the search. Zara looked up at the gray clouds above. He let out a somber sigh.

“Um, Zara...” I asked nervously. “Does it look dangerous?”

“Probably...” he replied grimly. “I just can’t tell. Mountain weather can change at the drop of a hat.”

More black clouds started to drift across the sky. In my village, we were

always told to run home if we saw the sky looking like this. But I was working now; I couldn't turn and go home.

Zara reported his concerns to the captain, who conceded, "Yeah, it's not looking good...but we have to go a bit further. We'll turn around if the wind gets too strong."

With that, we pressed on. It wasn't snowing, but the accumulated snow on the ground grew thicker and thicker the further we went, making it even harder to walk.

Ulgus and I were still tied together; he slowed his pace so I could keep up without being yanked. The wind gusted between us. Underneath the swaying tree branches, the snow crunched beneath each of our steps.

We had heard those various sounds ever since we'd set out on the mountain. But just then, I heard something...different. I asked Ulgus to stop and listened closely.

"...Ah!" I gasped.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Something's approaching."

"Could it be the nobleman's son?"

"No... It...it sounds like a four-legged beast."

"Y-You're kidding..."

It was still far away, but the animal was marching purposefully forward to us. We were probably going to run into it in under ten minutes. Even if we ran, it'd have no trouble catching up.

Of course, Ulgus reported this to Captain Ludtink, who concluded the beast must be a snowbear, which Garr agreed with. Garr hadn't noticed it sooner due to the wind, but he could smell the beast approaching now.

Everyone set their bags down and armed themselves, preparing for battle. Ulgus and I fell back together, undoing our rope.

"Still can't believe we ran into a snowbear of all things..." Ulgus sounded

deeply annoyed. He readied an arrow to fire then, after thinking a moment, unnotched it and sighed. “Of all the rotten... The wind’s too strong for me to land a shot.”

“Yeah...” I replied. “I get what you mean.”

On windy days like these, we Fore Elves couldn’t hunt either since it’d be a complete waste of arrows. But there was said to have been a Fore Elf long ago who knew how to read the wind perfectly and sense when to fire. He was called the Legendary Hunter. Of course, it was possible he was a myth.

“Snowbears are one of the ten kinds of monsters not even hardened knights want to battle,” Ulgus muttered darkly. “It’s awful we ran into one here, of all places.”

“Agreed...” I realized my forehead had been sweating ever since I first heard the monster.

“As it’s a mid-tier monster,” Ulgus explained, “we’re forbidden to fight against a snowbear unless we’re in a party of over five fighters.”

“You can’t fight them?” I cried in disbelief. “But that’s your only *choice* if you encounter one...”

“Well...” Ulgus muttered, “they have their reasons. The biggest reason for these combat limits is because of the money used to compensate for deaths and injuries. Fighting in a group of less than five means a sharp decrease in the payout.”

“Wow, that’s a pretty awful rule!”

Although once he’d explained that rule, it *did* sound a little familiar. But rule explanations always made me sleepy and lasted half a day. I wasn’t used to spending so much time just sitting and listening. *I must’ve dozed off in training and missed that part...*

“I guess I’ll have to brush up on all those rules again...” I lamented.

“Yeah,” Ulgus replied, “that’s probably a good idea. Knights get paid a lot. But they’ll let just about anyone join, so you get a lot of nasty types and even nastier rules.”

“Uh-huh...” I thought chatting with Ulgus would make me feel better. But this was definitely the wrong topic; the mood between us only grew heavier.

“Ah! I think they’re about to start.” As soon as he said that, I broke out in goosebumps.

Captain Ludtink, at the front of the line, readied his sword and bent his knees. *The snowbear must be close.*

“Medic Risurisu,” Ulgus said sternly, “move away if you see the snowbear at all. You never know what might happen.”

“R-Right...”

He ordered me to go report to headquarters if two or more squad members got too injured to fight. “I’ve got medic training too, so don’t worry,” Ulgus said. “I can help the others even if you’re not here.”

“Yes, sir.” I just hoped it wouldn’t come to that. But Ulgus’s expression was uncharacteristically uneasy, which made it hard to keep chatting.

I just held my breath as I watched over the group. The wind’s whistling started to sound even louder, as did the sound of my pounding heart.

Then a pair of crimson eyes emerged from between the trees.

“...ck!” I was about to scream but managed to stop myself.

“It’s all right,” Ulgus said to me, though I was still just as frightened. The snowbear was now just barely within my sight.

I separated from Ulgus to watch the other members in battle. I’d always resented my lack of magic, but never as much as I did today. *If I could bless them or cast healing magic, we’d all feel so much more confident.*

As it was, I couldn’t even treat them properly in an emergency. I grit my teeth, upset with my own shortcomings. The only way I could help them was by monitoring the battle and reporting back to headquarters for backup, if needed.

I can’t look away, no matter what happens!

Finally, the snowbear emerged, and it was...absolutely enormous! Even on four legs, it stood taller than Captain Ludtink. Its white fur stood on end as it

growled, baring its fangs.

I started trembling, even though I was so far away. Goosebumps formed on my skin. I was breaking out in a sweat.

Worse yet, the wind suddenly picked up and began blowing the snow right off the ground. It started getting harder to keep standing against the flurry. But the knights held their ground, and I heard the echoing clanging of their weapons. I knew the beast's skin must be as hard as metal.

But Captain Ludtink stood in opposition to face the monster. Vice Captain Velrey hovered, waiting for the perfect time to strike. Garr landed a long-distance hit with his spear, but it barely scratched the monster.

Zara then swung his ax, aiming for the beast's tendon as he wedged his blade into its leg. A red blood spray stained the surrounding snow.

The gigantic snowbear stumbled to one side. At once, the squad backed up.

"Ahh! Talk about bad timing!" Ulgus griped as a powerful gust of wind kicked up the snow and whited out their vision. It was perfectly camouflaging the snowbear.

He drew an arrow back, and I heard a sharp pluck as he loosed it and it soared forward. *But wait...I think it's going the wrong way...*

"Ah, wow! Y-You did it!" I cheered.

His arrow struck the beast in the leg, right where Zara had already wounded it. I couldn't believe how good Ulgus's aim was to land such a shot inside this wind.

The snowbear writhed around in pain. *Was that a poison arrow? It's in a lot of distress...*

Captain Ludtink and the others began to retreat, and Ulgus turned to me as they did.

"We're falling back too, Medic Risurisu."

"Ah! Right..."

Ulgus explained what he'd done as we fell back. The arrow he'd landed *was*

coated with poison, and he said the snowbear would eventually succumb to it the more it struggled.

I was right!

I realized everyone except me had abandoned their bags. *I hope we can recover them later...*

Granted, Ulgus carried my bags full of medical supplies and food for me. I really appreciated it since he was way stronger than me...

Our meetup spot was the cave we'd rested in earlier, but no one else had arrived yet.

"It's all right, Medic Risurisu," Ulgus said as we entered the cave together. "I'm sure the others are safe."

"Yes, you're right," I said, choosing to believe in Captain Ludtink's undefeatable bandit's soul.

Just to be safe, I covered the ground at the cave entrance with holy water. *This should prevent the snowbear from approaching.*

We decided to eat while we waited for the others.

It hadn't been very long since our last break, but I was shockingly hungry again. Ulgus built us a fire using the fuel bricks we'd been provided.

I started by boiling water and making tea. The herbal tea didn't taste very nice, but once I sipped it, all my stress seemed to melt away.

"I feel bad eating without the others," Ulgus said, "but I think we should go ahead..."

"You're right." I nodded and I opened up a bag of provisions from headquarters.

Inside the bag were some sausages that seemed like a fast, efficient way to fill up. I took them out, pierced them with a fork, and roasted them over the fire.

Ulgus and I were completely silent as we cooked our meal. At one point, my sausage's skin burst, sending juices dripping into the fire below. Once the outside was nice and brown, they were ready to eat. I took some bread out of

my bag and passed it to Ulgus.

After a prayer, it was time to eat. I started with my freshly roasted sausage. Fat oozed from the center as I bit into it, nearly burning my tongue. The rich flavoring between the minced meat and herbs made the sausage delicious, even without any toppings. And the skin had a snap to it, revealing tender meat on the inside—full of a salty, concentrated umami flavor. My mouth was experiencing pure bliss with each bite.

Just as I began to wonder if the other squadrons always ate such delicious meals, Ulgus suddenly spoke up.

“Medic Risurisu...” he said somberly. “I think the nobleman’s family provided these sausages.”

So this is pretty expensive then, huh? I guess that’s why it’s so delicious...

I wanted to cook something else, but my large pot had been too heavy to bring with me, so I only had a small pot for tea.

Still unsatisfied, I searched around in my bag, looking for something I could make without a pot. I had biscuits, cheese liver pâté, and smoked meat.

It took me a moment, but then it hit me. “Hmm... Ah! I can make canapés.”

Canapés were made by placing things like cheese, vegetables, or meat atop a bread base like a biscuit. Maria, Captain Ludtink’s former wet nurse, had made these at his house.

“Can you please give me a hand, Ulgus?”

I spread some liver pâté on a biscuit, set a slice of cheese on top, and sprinkled black pepper over it. I even made both sweet and salty varieties using sausage and cheese, baked forest apples, and chocolate.

I made sure to have lots ready for when our squadmates showed up. Ulgus and I each ate two or three canapés until we were full. I could have eaten more, but the anxiety in my chest was holding me back.

“They’re still not back yet...” Ulgus murmured to himself; his voice sounded gloomy. I decided to quietly help him out by gathering some nearby sticks for firewood to keep the fire going.

No matter how hard I listened, all I could hear was the sound of the wind blowing snow around. It only made me more uneasy. It didn't seem like our squadmates would be back anytime soon.



A little under an hour later, Captain Ludtink and the others were still nowhere to be seen.

"I'm so worried... What if I messed up that poison arrow and they still had to fight the snowbear...?" Ulgus's voice was shaking as he cradled his head.

"It's okay. Your arrow was perfect, Ulgus." I bragged that my eyes were just as good as my ears, so I could tell.

"What if the poison didn't *work*...?"

"It's all right! You're worrying too much."

Well, I can't claim to know if it worked, but I do know it'll do him better not to think so negatively... He'll probably feel better if he eats something sweet!

"How about we have some chocolate, Ulgus? I have marshmallows too!"

I rummaged around in the bag of provisions the nobles had given us and retrieved the sweets.

"I've actually never had marshmallows before..." I mused. I knew they were made from a mixture of sugar, egg whites, water, and gelatin. They were supposed to be so soft and fluffy, they melted in your mouth too.

The popular stories in my village always depicted princesses as eating marshmallows for a treat. As a child, I used to dream about what they'd taste like. I never imagined I'd get to find out for myself!

They were round, soft, and dyed in cute colors like pink and yellow. Just imagining all the old, gruff knights eating these was quite a funny scene.

I placed a marshmallow on Ulgus's palm and stuffed another one in my mouth.

"*Wowwwwww!* So fluffy! It's amazing!"

It was just as fluffy and smooth as it looked. The sweetness was subtle, and

whenever I chewed, I got a taste of sweet but sour fruit flavors seeping out of the inside. It dissolved away perfectly in my mouth like I was eating snow.

Despite being in a dark cave, I suddenly felt like I was in a fairy tale!

“These are delicious, Ulgus! You should try it.”

Marshmallows turned out to be even better than I’d dreamed! But despite my urging, Ulgus simply stared down in a daze.

Only one thing to do! I snatched the marshmallow from his palm and stuffed it in his mouth.

“Mmph!”

“Be sure to chew properly,” I said, smiling.

Ulgus munched on the marshmallow. Despite me saying he’d feel much better, his face didn’t brighten up.

“Ah, that’s right! I read in a book that marshmallows are delicious when roasted over a fire!” I quickly speared two marshmallows on a fork and stuck them over the fire, then I put one on another fork and handed it to Ulgus.

There was said to be a trick to roasting them just right. Getting them too close to the flames right away would burn them. *Maybe it’s more accurate to call it “warming” marshmallows rather than roasting them...*

Ulgus’s eyes were still dead as he cooked his marshmallow. I focused on keeping mine a safe distance from the fire, rotating the fork when that corner of the marshmallow was golden brown.

“That’s much better.”

It was still too hot to eat. I’d have to wait for them to cool. A sweet scent began to fill the cave. That alone was enough to boost my mood.

It’s probably cool by now. Just to be safe, I blew on it before chomping down.

“Ouch!” It was still hot!

I blew on it some more and tried again.

“...Mm... Ouch... But it’s really good!”

The outside was crisp and the inside was practically liquid.

It seemed like the marshmallow's flavor only became richer when roasted. *Ah, it's so delicious!* There I was, sitting in darkness with nothing but snow outside, yet I felt happy. Ulgus decided to try his marshmallow when he saw me eating mine.

"Whoa. That's good..." He started to smile as he took a bite. Even his brow was unfurrowing.

I knew it! Delicious food really is the key to cheering up.

"Let's make hot chocolate, Ulgus! You can drink it with marshmallows in it too."

This was another treat enjoyed by princesses in the stories I'd read.

"I bet that tastes really sweet," he grinned.

"Yes, most definitely."

But hot chocolate wasn't something I could drink normally. It was a waste of money. But the nobleman's family had given us not only marshmallows but delicious, expensive chocolates...

Just as I was about to heat up my pot, I heard a sound coming our way.

"Is something wrong, Medic Risurisu?" Ulgus asked, seeing me stiffen suddenly.

"Something's coming!" I cried.

Each footstep came as a heavy thud. Ulgus got into a low position and brought up his bow.

"Is it a snowbear?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, I can't tell..." I said.

It sounded like the footsteps of more than one creature. *Don't tell me it brought its friends this time?!*

The wind was blowing harder than before, howling loud enough to drown out all surrounding noises. All I could sense was the overwhelming hostility from whatever it was. A chill ran down my spine.

“Get behind me, Medic Risurisu!” Ulgus ordered as he crouched down lower and drew his bow tight. “If it comes to it, you’ll have to make a run for it while the snowbear’s distracted by me.”

“I-I can’t leave you...”

“Calling for backup is just as important!”

He’s actually trying to sacrifice himself, so I can escape...

“Can you do that for me?” he pleaded.

“A-All right...”

This was the unluckiest place to have to fight a snowbear. We were completely alone, with only one way out.

Neither one of us is going to taste good at all. We definitely taste disgusting! I tried to tell the snowbear telepathically.

The sound of crunching snow approached us.

“There’s two! I can hear two angry snowbears!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding...”

The snowbears were already at the cave entrance...

Stomp, stomp.

But what came in was...

“H-Huh?” I said dumbly.

“What is it?” Ulgus asked.

“U-Um...”

I gently urged Ulgus to lower his poison arrow.

“But it’s dangerous!” he protested. “I can sense something truly bloodthirsty coming straight here!”

“It’s all right. What you’re sensing is...”

Through the darkness of the cave, I could just faintly make out something approaching us.

“Medic Risurisu, this is bad!” Ulgus cried. “I’ve never sensed a monster so terrifying!”

“Who the hell’re you callin’ a monster?!”

A deep voice echoed through the cave. It was...Captain Ludtink!

“Huhhhh?!” Ulgus sputtered.

“So you two were sittin’ in here havin’ a tea party, while we cleaned up a *total disaster* by ourselves?!”

Ulgus finally lowered his bow. I saw tears start to form in his eyes.

“C-Captaaaain!!” He stood up and tried to divebomb Captain Ludtink with a hug, only to be grabbed by the cheeks and forced to a screeching halt.

“Gross! What do ya think you’re doin’?!”

“B-But...!”

Well, I understand his enthusiasm... We both thought it was the snowbear, and he must’ve thought the captain was dead...

Garr, Vice Captain Velrey, and Zara all came in after the captain. Garr was even carrying the missing man on his back!

“Garr found him along the way,” Vice Captain Velrey explained in an exhausted voice. “But he was stuck halfway down a ledge, and we needed time to pull him up.”

They really ran themselves ragged to rescue this guy...

Vice Captain Velrey’s eyes were glazed over, and Zara’s hair was a mess, making him look particularly worn-out. Garr’s tail was sagging too.

“Damn it all...” the captain muttered. “This little brat nearly got us killed!”

Now it makes sense. This rescue was so taxing on the captain, he became upset enough to give off more bloodlust than a monster...

Garr set the man down on a blanket.

“Mmph,” the man groaned slightly. But as I began talking to him, he was able to respond and even give us his name. *Good, he’s still alert!*

I examined him more closely and spotted a red rash all over his arms, legs, and cheeks. It was most likely minor frostbite.

“We need to get him warm first before anything else.” I was about to take off my jacket before Garr stopped me.

He explained that, since he already had fur on his body, he could lend the young nobleman his own jacket.

“Thank you, Garr!” I exclaimed; his coat was large enough to cover the man’s whole body.

With that, we built another, larger fire to warm him up. Then I brought some snow in to boil. When I tested the man’s body temperature again, I could tell his fingertips were warmer than before.

Once his circulation had improved, I dried his body off with a towel, massaged the frostbitten areas and topped them off with moisturizing cream.

That was all I could do for first aid. “As long as his body temperature doesn’t go back down,” I said to the others, “he’ll be all right.”

A blizzard had formed outside the cave, the others explained. It felt like a miracle that they’d managed to stumble upon us at all.

“Garr said he smelled something sweet,” the captain said. “I knew that had to be you two, so I made the choice to follow the smell.”

“I see...”

The roasted marshmallows brought us back together again; they’re a miracle dessert!

“Oh, that’s right!” I cried. “Roasting these marshmallows makes them really, really delicious!”

“Nah, I’ll pass.” The captain really didn’t like sweets. His demand to eat something else snapped me out of my spell.

“I’m sorry, let me cook some— Ah! I’ll start with tea!”

I’d stopped paying as much attention after I’d patched the boy up, but the rest of my squad hadn’t eaten anything yet.

I offered them leftover canapés, boiled up some water, and roasted the rest of the sausages for them.



WE waited a while for the unforgiving blizzard to pass. Luckily, it died down after about an hour. Our journey back down the mountain was a silent one.

The others carried the young man in a makeshift stretcher of blankets and spears. When I asked what we'd do if we found ourselves having to fight along the way, Captain Ludtink gave a shocking response.

"We'll have to ditch the kid and make a run for it."

"Wh-What?! That's terrible!"

Captain Ludtink let out a roar of a laugh. *Not unlike what a bandit might do!* I could hardly believe my ears. But Zara calmly told me, "He's just joking. Don't mind him."

The captain's face was scary enough to convince me of just about anything, so I wished he'd be a little more responsible with his jokes.

The sun had almost set. If we didn't get back soon, we'd be walking in total darkness. We cut down on chit-chat and focused on trudging forward in the snow.

Miraculously, we managed to return to headquarters safely. The young nobleman was quickly rushed off to a doctor, and luckily, his injuries were minor. The doctor even praised my field treatment.

Once we reported back, the young man's family came to give their thanks. The aristocratic men were in tears, having been told that the chances of safely recovering him were slim.

I was so relieved for it to all be over...until it wasn't over.

"We'll go pick up our bags tomorrow," the captain said to my horror.

Everyone aside from me had abandoned their gear and those bags contained valuables, so we had to go back up the mountain to retrieve them.

"They also told us to confirm if the snowbear's a corpse," the captain

explained.

“Whaaat?!” Ulgus and I cried out simultaneously.

This meant we had to stay here yet another night. I was *really* hoping we’d be able to go home, since our carriage was still here.

But at the same time, I knew nothing ever went as planned.

Ulgus fell to the floor and cradled his head. He really seemed shocked to have to stay another day.

“What’s with *you?*” the captain sniffed. “Did you have plans in the city?”

“No...it’s not like I have a fiancée or anything...” Ulgus muttered sadly.

Captain Ludtink’s face stiffened at the word “fiancée.” We had all been pretending not to notice, but yesterday morning, he’d shown up with a bright red palm-print on his cheek. It’d faded significantly since then, but there was no mistake, he’d heard that line: “*What’s more important? Your job, or me?!?*”

I wished I could’ve heard it in real life just once. *Not that it’s any of my business...*

Ulgus was still just as depressed.

“Then what’s the big deal?” the captain asked, trying not to sound annoyed.

“...I don’t like the food here,” he grumbled.

“Too bad! They scraped together whatever provisions they had in a rush. It’s not like there’s any chefs out here.”

But Ulgus wasn’t wrong to complain. The soup we had for lunch was hard to forget. To put it bluntly, it stunk. Ulgus had tears in his eyes as he pleaded with Captain Ludtink to eat something tasty.

“Umm...Ulgus, I don’t know if I can make anything that *good*, but would you like me to cook something instead?” I felt that, at the very least, I could prepare something better than the food they were serving here.

“Y-You really don’t mind?” Ulgus asked, lighting up.

“Not at all.”

“Thank you so much, Medic Risurisu!!” A tear rolled down his cheek.

It really means that much to you?

As I began to ponder what kind of dinner I could even make, Captain Ludtink suddenly thrust something right in my face.

“Here, you can use this.”

“Eek!!”

It was another headless animal that, from the looks of it, had been a mountain hare. The head was gone, and the blood was drained, but other than that, he hadn’t skinned it at all!

“Where did *this* come from?” I asked.

“I hunted it on the mountain while we were saving the kid.”

He’d been planning ahead in the event that they couldn’t regroup with us!

I took the hare from Captain Ludtink. He made it look light, but as soon as it was in my hand, its weight made me stagger.

“Aren’t you tired, Melly? Are you sure about this?” Zara put his hand on my back for support as he looked down at my face. I nodded.

“I’m all right,” I smiled. I hadn’t hit my limit just yet.

Not wanting to get in the way of the knight chefs in their kitchen, I decided to cook outside instead. Just to be safe, I had Captain Ludtink ask his superiors for permission first.

Garr gathered firewood for me while Ulgus and Vice Captain Velrey retrieved some ingredients. Zara was going to be my assistant.

While I waited for the others to return with the materials, I began to clean the rabbit. I bound its back legs, hung it from a tree, cut notches into the legs, and began to pull the skin back.

“Look at you, Melly!” Zara whistled. “You’re good at that.”

“My dad was a great rabbit hunter...”

“You don’t say?”

“The role of cleaning small animals in my village,” I explained, “belongs to the women. By the time I was ten, I’d already had this whole routine memorized, though, at that age, I was always in tears as I cleaned the carcasses.”

I removed the organs, separated the flesh and bones, and washed the body by kneading it with snow.

“You’re good at this too, Zara,” I observed as he began slicing up the rabbit with surprising ease. I figured it was a skill he’d learned in the restaurant, but that didn’t turn out to be the case.

“Rabbit was all I ate growing up too.”

“Is that right?”

When I asked how they prepared their rabbits, the response I received surprised me.

“We cooked them in a soup made from their blood.”

“Wow!”

Zara explained that obtaining food in snowy regions was extremely difficult, so they refused to waste any parts of the animals they caught, including the blood.

“We did make blood sausages in my village...” I said.

“That’s pretty normal. What about blood pudding?”

“No, I’ve never even heard of that.”

Zara told me that it was made with the blood of livestock mixed with spices and wheat. Naturally, it was high in iron content. They even ate it with raspberry sauce.

“I can’t imagine what that’d taste like at all...” I said.

“Hmm...” he pondered a second. “I guess it’s like when you mess up a pancake?”

What exactly does a messed-up pancake taste like...? It certainly sounded very mysterious.

“So, like pancakes...it doesn’t actually taste like blood?”

“Yeah, not at all!”

“I see.”

I was a bit curious to try some. As someone who was chronically low on iron, this sort of seemed like a good solution.

“Whenever I talk about these things with other girls,” he said to me, “they always get grossed out.”

“Do they? Well...every culture has its unique dishes.” Even my village ate a dish made from rotten beans. Zara was surprised to hear that.

I’d always thought it was a common food eaten everywhere until I offered it to a trader one day. He grimaced and yelled, “I’ve never smelled such disgusting food before!” That’s when I realized it was only a tradition in my village.

“Oh, I get it,” Zara said. “You let the beans ferment.”

“Yep, but I don’t really like it, since it stinks so bad.”

Zara courageously expressed a desire to try it someday.

Captain Ludtink and the others returned to us just as we finished cleaning the rabbit. He’d received permission for us to cook outside.

I was going to work on the meat while the rest of my squad helped out by slicing vegetables and starting a fire.

First, I put some snow in my pot, added the rabbit’s bones, and started to make a broth.

While I waited for the snow to melt, I ground up the rabbit’s meat, including the soft bones of its back. Once the meat was minced, I kneaded in some spices to give it a more pleasant odor.

The snow melted and came to a boil. I removed the foam from the pot, then took out the bones and added distilled liquor.

Vice Captain Velrey tossed in the sliced vegetables to simmer for a while.

The soup was at a nice boil, so I added the rabbit meat and bone meatballs to the pot. Once again, I scooped out the foam that formed on the top.

After adding a few more spices to the soup, my “Rabbit Meatball Snow Soup”

was complete.

The sky was darkening. I had to rely on my lantern's light to pour the soup into bowls. I felt the piercing stares from the other knights outside on patrol. But I was far too hungry to succumb to the embarrassment. We were all ready to eat.

Captain Ludtink reached into my bag to take out some forest apple cider.

"Captain Ludtink!" I cried. "You can't drink that!"

"Ahh, stop worrying! None of the higher-ups are gonna come out here to check on us."

He filled up enough cups for all of us, apparently prepared to make us his co-conspirators. After praying, Captain Ludtink held out the cider cups for each of us to take.

We each accepted them with forced smiles on our faces.

"You did well today," he said proudly. "Drink up as much as you like."

Even though it's just an amateur's cider that was made illegally... But I decided to forget all my misgivings and toast with the rest of them.

I downed my cup in one gulp, immediately feeling my body start to warm from the inside out. The alcohol was permeating my exhausted body.

Now it was time to try the rabbit soup.

I took a taste of the broth first, immediately startled by the sweetness in it. Captain Ludtink's sloppy job of draining the blood actually turned out quite nice. Rabbits were always so delicious in the winter.

The meat itself wasn't unlike chicken. The meatballs were hot and appetizingly aromatic thanks to the spices they were filled with. I could feel the crisp pieces of bone in each bite too.

It was delicious. It was delicious, but...the guilt from my illegal liquor operation still ate at me. I slumped over as I quietly downed my soup.

Everyone was completely silent, but I could see their reactions on their faces.

Thankfully, they seemed to be enjoying my meal.



CAPTAIN Ludtink tugged at his rope as he climbed up the snowy mountain. He turned around with a glare on his face, checking to see if everyone else on the rope was still walking—much like a bandit might.

Our squad trudged along reluctantly on the steep, snowy path.

Captain Ludtink gave another firm yank of the rope, seeming fed up with the relaxed speed of those behind him.

“C’mon, get a move on!”

“U-Urgh...”

“Ah! D-Don’t be so mean...”

The people in tow—Ulgus and me—responded on the verge of tears.

We were all tied up with rope like criminals because we didn’t want to go up this mountain ever again.

Ulgus and I, the most delicate members of the squadron, still hadn’t recovered from the shock of seeing the snowbear the first time around. But Captain Ludtink was unforgiving. He tied us up on a rope and dragged us along like prisoners. And with that, we made a tearful return to the snowy mountain.

Vice Captain Velrey felt bad for us, but Captain Ludtink simply ordered her not to baby us.

Zara kindly offered to carry me on his back, but I felt too guilty to accept. Ulgus was annoyed when he heard me turn Zara down.

“I want a piggyback ride...” he muttered.

“Oh my... Well, I don’t mind!” Zara grinned.

That made Ulgus recoil. He definitely didn’t expect to hear that! “Actually, no thank you,” he declined quietly.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron, completely dead on the inside, pressed forward in a line.

Only Zara, who grew up in the snow, seemed unaffected by all of it.

It was the day after our rescue of the young nobleman. Yesterday's weather had been so horrible, but today, the sky was completely blue. The world around us was covered in a still blanket of snow. Though it glittered under the light of the sun, this was a landscape that was just as easily fatal as it was eye-catching. It was an awfully cruel sort of beauty.

"Captain, let's just forget about the snowbear! What if it's still alive?"

Captain Ludtink had no intention of listening to Ulgus's desperate plea. He explained that knights received rewards for defeating mid to high-tier monsters, so long as they could provide proof. The captain had been eager to bring the snowbear's head back with him all morning.

"We fought through a dangerous storm to kill that thing. I'll even report that you killed it with a single arrow," he grinned.

"No, please don't!" Ulgus cried. "I don't want everyone to start having high hopes for me in battle."

"You'll get a bonus, so pipe down and let me report it."

"Noooo!"

Sensitive little Ulgus. I *definitely* wanted a bonus, so I asked Captain Ludtink to report about how I'd managed to hear the snowbear's footsteps approaching us.

After a two-hour walk, we stumbled across the bags we abandoned yesterday thanks to Garr's nose. Sadly, we had to dig them out from underneath all the snow that'd fallen since then.

We moved on to search for the snowbear corpse from there. We'd thrown down our bags not too far from the scene of the battle, but the blood stains were covered up by snow at this point, forcing us to rely on Garr's nose again.

The bear appeared to have walked around for quite some time after being hit by the arrow.

"Are all your arrows poisonous, Ulgus?" I asked.

"No, not all of them," he replied. "Poison arrows are really expensive, so I don't get to use them too often."

“I see.”

He told me that the poison arrows were provided to him by the order. “Their arrowheads are made with enchanted stones that react to monster blood, forming a type of poison.”

“Wow, I didn’t know arrows could do things like that.”

These were supposedly a weapon created by a special national institution called the “Monster Research Department.” Ulgus had to write a report whenever he used a poison arrow, so it was a bit of a hassle.

“That Monster Research Department...” Zara sounded like he had some thoughts on the topic.

“Um, what kind of group are they?”

“Exactly what they *sound* like,” Zara muttered. “A den of weirdos who spend day and night researching monsters.” He explained they operated thanks to a certain prominent nobleman’s support. “They’re always begging me to bring them monster corpses to work with.”

“That’s...certainly interesting.”

Zara knew people in the department by the sound of it, and they had rushed to him with their requests as soon as they’d learned he was assigned to an expeditionary squadron. *Poor Zara.*

As we were talking, Garr suddenly stopped. There was a lump of snow a bit further down the path.

“Is that where the snowbear ended up?” Ulgus asked.

“Looks like it,” the captain said. He dropped the rope and began to prod at the snow with his sword.

Now free, Ulgus and I slowly backed away from the bear’s remains as the captain, Vice Captain Velrey, Garr, and Zara all used their weapons to dig out the snowbear. After only a few minutes of digging, the corpse was fully exposed.

“All right, I’m takin’ its head,” the captain said. “Gimme your ax, Zara.”

“No way! You’ll ruin the blade.”

“Swords aren’t good at cuttin’ off solid things.”

“Fine...I suppose I’ll help you out.”

Captain Ludtink had been swinging at the bear’s neck with his sword all this time. The rest of the knights couldn’t bring themselves to watch him like that.

“Whoa...he really looks like a bandit,” I said rudely, but Ulgus nodded in silent agreement with me.

In the end, Captain Ludtink had to use Zara’s ax. The snowbear’s body was undergoing rigor mortis on top of being frozen, so this was no easy task for the captain. But he finally claimed the snowbear’s head, a triumphant smile overtaking his face.

The rest of the corpse would be buried underneath the falling snow. We sprinkled the body with holy water so that no other monsters would approach, then sprinkled the head too.

We then wrapped the head in a blanket for Captain Ludtink and Garr to drag along the way back. Although the blanket wasn’t big enough, so the bear’s nose was poking out the whole time. It was kind of cute...and also kind of not!

No, definitely not cute!

But today’s mission was now over. All that was left was to make it back down the mountain...until Captain Ludtink stopped us for lunch.

“I don’t want to eat lunch with a snowbear’s head as our centerpiece...” I grumbled.

“Look, we’ll just keep it nearby,” he said. “We can’t go down the mountain on empty stomachs.”

“Urgh...”

He was right. I *was* hungry. But, strangely enough, my appetite disappeared whenever I looked at the snowbear.

Collapsing on the way back to headquarters would just make me a burden on my squadmates. I was planning on having us eat bread and jerky as we

continued back down, but...

“Ah!”

“What is it?” Ulgus asked.

“Our bread is hard as a rock!”

I couldn't believe it. The bread was completely frozen solid. *I shouldn't have kept the food in this thin leather shoulder bag!* Now I knew—this was something that happened on mountain expeditions. Captain Ludtink grimaced, looking down at the frozen bread.

“I don't wanna eat any more soggy soup bread,” he muttered.

“Please don't be selfish, Captain,” I said. I'd been planning on putting the bread into a soup the second I saw how hard it was, but Captain Ludtink swiftly put a stop to that.

With no other options, I was forced to prepare a meal that'd take a bit of time.

We moved into the cave we discovered yesterday, and I asked Garr and Ulgus to build me a fire to work with.

First, I retrieved a jar of butter that the kitchen worker knights had given me. *“If you're feeling sluggish on the mountain, eat some butter!”* one had told me enthusiastically.

I realized this man was probably the culprit behind the overly buttered soup the other day. I never expected to meet a butter fanatic in a knight's kitchen.

“Why'd they give you butter?” Ulgus asked.

“Probably because it's a quick way to get nutrients,” I replied.

Butter contained protein, fat, carbohydrates, and sodium—all of which were important for the body. Not that it was very fun to bite into directly.

I focused my attention back on the meal at hand. I placed thinly sliced cheese, smoked meats, and black pepper on the frozen bread.

Next, I tried to put the butter in the hot pot... *Put the butter in the hot pot...*

“Grrrrrrr...” The butter was frozen too. My metal spoon couldn't penetrate it

at all!

“Let me see that, Melly.”

“Th-Thank you...”

Zara pried some butter out of the jar and tossed it into the pot. I could hear it sizzle as soon as it hit the hot metal.

Spreading the melted butter over the surface, I placed the frozen sandwich on top. After pressing it down a bit with my spatula, the bread turned nice and brown. It was ready to eat.

“These are my crunchy meat and cheese sandwiches!”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Captain Ludtink mumbled, taking a sandwich.

I could only grill two sandwiches at once, so I gave the second to today’s other hardest worker—Garr.

Captain Ludtink, apparently sensitive to hot foods, blew on his sandwich quite a lot before biting it.

“Ouch...!” It was still too hot. The captain’s face was bright red.

Zara handed him a cup of steaming hot tea.

“Damn it!” the captain yelled. “You *know* I can’t eat hot stuff, don’t ya?!”

“Oh dear...” Zara clucked. “Is that right?”

I’d always been so busy eating my own food that I’d never noticed the captain’s sensitivity to heat. *What a great discovery!*

As they ate, I cooked more sandwiches. They were supposed to be for Vice Captain Velrey and Zara, but...

“You can eat first, Ulgus.”

“You don’t mind, Ahto?”

“Not at all.”

Zara was such a sweet person. Ulgus, like me, had done nothing all day but whine. But Zara didn’t stop there. He even had some compassion left for me.

“I’ll make the next ones,” he said. “It can’t be much fun bent over this hot pot,

right?”

“Huh?! Ah, sure. Thank you very much.”

To my surprise, Zara had memorized my technique just by watching me. He grilled up a sandwich like it was nothing!

“Here you go!”

“Thank you so much!” I bit into Zara’s grilled sandwich.

“Wow, that’s amazing!”

The outside of the bread was extremely crunchy. Zara must’ve used more force than I did when grilling it.

Hot, gooey cheese oozed out from the center. It was the perfect flavor when combined with the salty meats inside. The cheese outside the bread had cooked to a crisp. It was especially flavorful and appetizing.

I see...so the textures differ depending on how much force you apply.



“It’s delicious, Zara! Thank you!”

“Is it? That’s good.”

Delicious food alone made me smile, even in a place as depressing as a mountain cave.

Zara and I took turns grilling the rest of the sandwiches after that. Ulgus and Vice Captain Velrey loved my crispy-yet-soft sandwiches, while Captain Ludtink and Garr preferred Zara’s crunchy sandwiches.

Though they were harder to make than normal sandwiches, I felt like, from time to time, it was definitely worth the extra effort.



WHEN we made it back to headquarters, we were informed that the young man’s nobleman father—Lord Altenburg—wanted to share his appreciation with us.

We gathered to hear him speak, but most other knights appeared to have already returned to the capital. So, including our Second Expeditionary Squadron, there were only twenty knights in the room.

“I cannot apologize enough for the mess my foolish son has dragged you all into.”

“*You got that right!*” I wanted to yell at him, but I held my tongue as Lord Altenburg explained the boy’s story to us.

Apparently, his son had eloped with a woman who worked for the family. His family had opposed their marriage for a long time. So when they had suddenly presented him with a young lady from a good family to marry, he’d decided to elope with the worker instead.

It was news to me, but the building we were using as headquarters for this mission was actually the servants’ quarters for the Altenburg family’s vacation property, while the family themselves stayed in a mansion a few minutes away by horse. The family often visited these grounds during the summer months, so the nobleman’s son was familiar with the area, including how to get to one of their cabins higher up the mountain.

The couple had decided to go different ways to better avoid the men hunting them down, agreeing to meet up later at the cabin. But that turned out to be a mistake. The boy recklessly decided to climb the mountain to reach the cabin, ignoring the poor weather.

Meanwhile, as the blizzard raged on, the worker girl decided to avoid the mountain and wait inside the lodge instead. She knew she couldn't get anywhere in such thick snow. She waited diligently for the boy to arrive at the lodge, but he never showed up. Of course, she never imagined that he'd gone ahead and gotten lost on the mountain. When she finally realized he might be in trouble, she reported his absence to the Royal Order.

I listened to Lord Altenburg's story, nodding along as I processed each detail.

The earl's son, wearing only a fur cloak, had actually made it to the cabin. But of course, his wife had never joined him, and worried about the quickly declining food stores in the cabin, he had decided to descend the mountain once more, where he stumbled off the side of a cliff.

The knights had set out to search the mountain cabin themselves, but their paths never crossed with the boy. At least everything was settled in that regard now. And again, the boy had only had minor injuries, so our search wasn't for not.

The Altenburg family had even agreed to approve of the marriage between the earl's son and their female employee. Fortunately, the girl belonged to a baron's family. So, despite the difference in peerage, she wasn't a complete stranger to the life of nobles. I hoped that, with the right mindset, she'd get by all right.

However...the earl was a boring storyteller and he took a long time to get to the point. I grew sleepier the more I listened. When Captain Ludtink saw me dozing off, he ordered me outside to wake up.

It felt rude to leave while the earl was speaking, but leaving was still better than dozing off while on my feet, so I agreed and left the room.

Once outside, I stretched. The air was chilly, but it stole the exhaustion right out of me. I felt much better than before.

Remembering I had left my pot out to dry yesterday, I headed in that direction. I found that butter had burned and scorched its sides, despite my best attempts to wash it clean. *I must not have spotted it last night because I washed the pot in a dark area.*

With my newfound energy, I decided to clean the pot once more, heading to the kitchen to grab a scrubbing brush.

I really felt like my pot had been getting scorched more often lately. It was already an old piece of kitchenware, so this progression was probably only natural. Still, I filled the pot with snow and began to scrub.

The stubborn burns just wouldn't come off, no matter how much pressure I put on the brush.

I was starting to get cold, so I pulled my hat down tighter around my head. Even my hands were growing numb. But the scorched pot still refused to clear up.

I was so focused on this task, I failed to notice...the person approaching me from behind.

"You must be the earl's daughter."

"Huh?!"

Just then, my body was lifted up into the air. I felt a cloth get wrapped around my mouth. I tried to scream that I was being kidnapped, but the cloth had been soaked with something that immediately made me black out.

I-I can't believe this...

As the world faded away around me, I felt myself being tied up. The last thing I saw was a gigantic man with a wild beard—an actual, genuine bandit.



THE sound of a loud holler woke me from my sleep. My eyes opened up to see a bandit letting out a hearty laugh.

That must be Captain Ludtink...

But who set my pot on me like a blanket? It's kind of heavy.

I was about to close my eyes again when I realized that the laughter sounded somewhat different from usual. My eyes flew open with a gasp. I tried to sit up, only to realize I was tied up and couldn't move.

The room I was in didn't look familiar. A bear pelt was sprawled out on the floor. Even the walls were lined with animal furs.

Three men who resembled bandits were sitting down, enjoying their liquor. Some sort of boar-pig roast was out in the center of the table. I could smell its stench in the air, meaning it probably hadn't been prepared right.

That's when the memory hit me—I'd been kidnapped. I could hardly believe I'd been so stupid to let dishwashing distract me enough for a bandit to get me!

What do I do now? I can't escape from three bandits.

I squirmed underneath the heavy pot, only to have it fall off my stomach with a loud clang. The bandits all turned to face me.

Each one was frightening, with wild beards and long swords resting within reach. These were genuine bandits—no doubt about it. They were on a completely different level from Captain Ludtink. My entire body filled with fear.

On the inside, I vowed to start calling Captain Ludtink the fancier bandit instead.

No, not the time!

"Awake, are ya?" one of them sneered, and they all stared at me, smirking.

Startled to suddenly be addressed, I rolled backward, still tied up, and crashed right into the wall instead.

"Yer the Altenburg girl, right?"

I wanted to tell them they were wrong, but I didn't know what would happen to me then. I simply nodded in response.

"She's not very...graceful for an earl's daughter, huh?" another bandit said.

Sorry, I'm just a simple country elf! I swallowed those words before voicing them.

I wondered what time it was. I had no idea how long it had been since these

men brought me here. The sky outside was pitch black. Beams of light from the moon poured inside.

After letting out a breath, I felt my stomach gurgle. The bandits broke out into laughter. It was a natural bodily function, but still, I was embarrassed.

“What, you’re hungry?” one of them laughed. “Batos, go feed her some meat.”

Wow, how kind... Wait, no!

The man called Batos sliced off a piece of the unappetizing boar-pig roast and carried it over to my mouth.

Are your hands clean?! And why was that knife so black? Did you prepare this right at all?!

I really didn’t want to get sick. As much as I wanted to scream that I had a sensitive stomach, I didn’t know what they might do to me if I refused, so I simply stayed silent.

He forced the bite of meat into my mouth.

“.....”

“Well?”

In all honesty...it was bad! Just plain terrible! The meat reeked! It was smelly, and, well, it just reeked!

This is the worst... But I managed to swallow the bite through my tears.

“You were downright starvin’, weren’t ya?” Batos said not unkindly. “Poor little girl. Here, have some more.”

“N-No thank you.”

“Don’t be shy!”

It wasn’t shyness, but rather, a deep hatred burning in my heart. The bandits kept feeding me spoiled meat.

Thank you soooooo very much... I thought darkly.

Once I finished eating, they explained themselves.

“We sent out a letter by arrow,” the first one, apparently the leader, said, “explainin’ we’ll give ya back to the earl if he agrees to our demands.”

“...Okay...”

I knew it was the knightly thing to do to comply with the negotiations. But what if they decided to abandon me? It was a chilling thought.

“Also...” the leader started.

“Y-Yes?”

“Well...what did ya have a pot for?”

“E-Er...”

“What’s an *earl’s* daughter doin’ washin’ a pot?”

“I-I wasn’t doing anything! In the presence of guests, it’s customary for young ladies to handle their care personally.”

I was totally lying. I was certain they wouldn’t believe something so silly, but then...

“Huh...” the leader mused. “So you cook too?”

“J-Just when receiving guests...”

“Then make us somethin’! If you can’t serve us a fancy meal, then you’re not really the earl’s daughter.”

“Uh, sure...”

The bandits were quick to buy the lie of the good-natured nobleman’s daughter.

They undid my ropes and ordered me to cook something. I kept my hat pulled down low to cover my long ears.

I pulled my overcoat closed tight too.

The coat I was wearing, made of leather and lined with fur on the inside, was provided to us by Lord Altenburg for our mountain search. It was probably what made me look like something other than a simple Fore Elf.

As they held their swords out to intimidate me, I arrived in a kitchen that was

heart-stoppingly messy. The stone oven was covered in soot while mountains of dirty cups and plates were stacked up at the sink. The utensils didn't look properly washed either.

I was lucky it was winter and there weren't any bugs out. Nonetheless, this wasn't an environment I could cook in.

"Excuse me..." I said simply. "I can't cook here. Would you make me a fire outside to use instead?"

"No!" Batos snarled. "Yer cookin' in here."

"But..." I stopped and let out a big sigh, deciding to pretend I never saw the state of this kitchen and looked at the ingredients they had instead.

They kept their food stored in a shed outside. These bandits appeared to live by hunting animals, so there was plenty of meat in the shed. I got the sense that they simply placed the carcasses straight inside, without so much as draining the blood first. The meat was all in a bad state and it really stunk in there.

"May I ask which of this meat is the freshest?"

"The snowbirds," Batos replied. "Just hunted 'em this morning."

I picked up one of the birds to see that its feathers were glossy and had no bad odor to speak of. This one, at least, would probably make for a delicious meal.

I'd heard that snowbirds tasted wonderful, but due to their fearful nature, they were difficult to hunt, so I'd never tried them before. Perhaps these hunters were more competent than they looked.

They also had spices and flour available, which I suspected were stolen.

Flour, spices, potatoes, and fresh snowbirds. I could probably make do with this...

"Oh! What about these eggs?" I asked.

"We brought 'em from the snowbird's nest this morning," the leader explained.

Of course, bandits wouldn't concern themselves with the preservation of

species or any such thing. Snowbirds were strange creatures whose mating season fell in the winter, so the eggs would probably be fresh and safe to eat.

As much as I felt like I could make a nice meal with these items...there was no way of knowing if the bandits themselves would enjoy it.

But what would they *do* to me if they found out I wasn't a member of the Altenburg family? I had to work hard if I wanted to prove that I was a young lady of high society.

The first step was to get cleaning. But I felt lightheaded when I pictured that disaster of a kitchen.



I immediately encountered my first major hurdle—these bandits didn't own any dish soap. How horrific! In fact, they had no soap at all.

I despaired, clutching my head in my hands. Then I remembered something my grandma once told me.

In the old days, they used to wash dishes with flour.

Of course! I could make soap powder out of flour!

From what I remembered of her explanation, the gluten absorbed oils and made removing dirt from the dishes easier. It felt like a waste of flour, but you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. So I rolled up my sleeves and started prepping food in the kitchen.

When I told him I would need hot water to clean with, the bandit on lookout duty went off to get me some...despite being the only lookout.

I felt like now was my chance to escape, but I didn't even know where I *was* in the first place. I decided to stay put, seeing as how I could easily get lost outside and find myself in the middle of a disaster.

Since they'd sent a ransom note, I was sure someone would come to save me soon anyway. I certainly hoped so, at least.

While I waited for the bandit to boil water, I drained the blood from the snowbird, bound its legs with rope, and tried to chop the head off with a nearby knife, only to realize it was too rusty.

“C’mon! Chop!” I demanded with each swing of the blade until I finally managed to sever the head.

...It was like the kind of messy decapitation they used to do long ago.

As I finally had a moment to relax, I heard the door open behind me. I turned around to lodge my complaint.

“Excuse me... But I can’t cut anything with this knife.”

“AHHH!” The bandit let out a shriek when he saw me. I asked him what the matter was, only for him to point out the blood all over my face.

“It’s just blood splatter from chopping. The blade was rusty, so I had to hack at the bird’s head a few times to sever it.”

“R-Right. Damn, you scared me.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

The man then agreed to sharpen the blade for me with their whetstone. He left through the back door.

I wanted to ask someone if this guy was really the best lookout. He certainly seemed like something of a scaredy-cat.

I hung the snowbird upside down and allowed the blood to drain. While I waited for it to finish, I decided to begin cleaning up the mess in the kitchen.

First, I dragged in a large bucket and filled it with all the dirty dishes until there was a substantial pile. I could finally see the countertops now that they had been cleared off.

The dishes were coated in layers of grease—hopefully, it was only grease... I had no desire to touch any of the grimy dishes whatsoever. But this was a necessity. Fortunately, they seemed to have a scrubbing brush I could work with, which would make the task a little bit easier.

The lookout bandit returned to tell me that the hot water was ready.

“Sorry, but the knife’s gonna take a bit longer.”

“That’s all right. It will still be a while before I can get this kitchen cleaned up.”

He directed me to the well outside their house when I asked him for water.

“It’s right out this door, on the left.”

“Thank you very much.”

Once again, I questioned the point of having a lookout on duty in the first place. But he just left to work on sharpening the knife some more.

I patted my cheeks with my hands to get myself motivated.

To start, I dissolved some flour into the hot water, then brought some snow in from outside to lower the mixture to a workable temperature. I poured the thick flour mixture onto the countertops and took the scrubbing brush to the surface.

While the results weren’t as impressive as using soap, the flour was decent at getting the counters clean. I had to be grateful for the power of gluten. I silently thanked my grandma for the knowledge she had gained throughout her life.

Once the countertops were clean, I moved on to the dishes. I wasn’t going to wash all of them, of course. I simply used my flour mixture to clean the grease off any dish I was going to need.

Finally, it was time to take on the stove.

I knew it would be full of ashes, so I covered my mouth with the handkerchief in my pocket before opening the stove door.

“Ugh! Gross!!” I cried, starting to cough.

As soon as the door was open, a plume of black ash rose up and hit me. I had to open all the windows and doors in the kitchen.

I brought out a bucket to put the ashes in, but when I searched around for a fire poker to rake the ashes out, I couldn’t find one.

“Hey, the knife’s nice and... What the hell’s all this?!” the man shouted before coughing from the ashes.

“This is what happens when you don’t clean your house!” I wanted to scream. When I asked him if he had a fire poker available, unbelievably, he said he’d never seen one before.

“Then please bring me something I can use instead.”

“We don’t got anything like that here.”

“But I can’t cook without removing these ashes first.”

“What am I supposed to do about it...?”

“Do you have any kind of long stick that’s flat on the end?” I asked before spotting just such a thing resting on the bandit’s waist. “Ah, I think I could use your sword to remove the ashes. May I borrow it?”

I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask. Despite how sure I was that he would say no...

“Sure. It’s all yours.”

“Th-Thank you.”

...You’re handing your weapon over to the hostage?

This guy was quite the airhead and seemed like a nice person at heart too. I started to worry if he was suited for banditry.

But that didn’t matter to me—it was time to clean. I quickly scraped out the ashes from the stove with the bandit’s sword.

Once the stove was in usable condition, it was finally time to start cooking.

My first task was to clean the snowbird. It was easy enough thanks to the knife the bandit sharpened for me.

“Rich girls know how to clean animals, huh?” the bandit said as he watched me work.

“W-We study it before we make our debut in high society,” I lied again.

“Huh, who woulda thunk it...?” He didn’t seem the slightest bit suspicious.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

The snowbird’s meat was plump and looked quite tasty. I removed the feathers and organs and cut the bird into parts like the neck meat, breast, wings, thighs, and skin.

Next, I combined the bones, flavorful portions of the wings, and potatoes in a pot to start a soup. I then seasoned it with a simple blend of spices and salt so that the ingredients’ flavors would shine through.

I'd roast the neck meat for us to eat on its own. I knew it'd be delicious with only a small sprinkle of salt. As a rarer cut of meat, the neck was chewy and full of rich, umami flavor.

"Excuse me. Do you have any distilled liquor?" I asked.

"Sure do."

"May I please borrow some for my recipe?"

"You got it," the bandit said, easily agreeing to my request.

"Here ya go."

"Thank you very much."

"What do ya need booze for, anyway?"

"Soaking the meat in alcohol makes it more tender."

The breast meat had little fat and was a bit dry in texture. But with the help of alcohol, it'd soften up significantly.

"Wow," the bandit remarked, impressed.

I rubbed some salt into the breast meat and set it in a bowl of alcohol to soak. As I waited, I dissolved more flour in water and mixed in eggs, salt, and pepper. Then I lit the stove and poured olive oil into a large pot. Once the pot was warm, I added enough batter to spread out thinly across the bottom. I cooked about twenty flat crackers and set them on top of a plate.

Now that I was done with the crackers, it was time to return to the snowbird.

I removed the breast meat from the liquor and rinsed it with water. I then cut it into thin strips and cooked it partially with boiling water.

Once I diced the potatoes up, I grilled them together with the bird's skin until they were all nice and crispy. The only seasoning it needed was salt and pepper.

I added some more flavor to the thighs, covered them in flour mixed with herbs, and fried it up to a crisp. *This'll be delicious!*

Finally, it was time to make the sauce...although it wasn't much to speak of. All I could do was add some spices to the oyster sauce I'd discovered—its expiration date a mystery—until it tasted acceptable enough.

I took a tray and piled on the fried thighs, grilled neck meat, boiled breast, crispy skins, potatoes, and thinly sliced cheese.

“So ya eat these with a bunch of flour coating around it?” the bandit asked.

“That’s right!”

“Yeah? It sure looks good.”

I wanted to make a meal that’d satisfy the bandits with what little meat was available from the single snowbird.

The lookout and I carried the dishes to the living room.

The bandits didn’t appear to own a dining table. Instead, they placed their plates on the floor and ate there. I brought out the thin crackers made of batter, assorted meats, the soup pot, and dishes. They didn’t even have spoons, since their main source of food was simply meat. Apparently, they only used knives to cut off slices.

“What *is* this stuff?” asked the head bandit.

“It’s a snowbird rice cracker,” I explained.

“I ain’t ever seen anythin’ like this before.”

“They’re...very popular in the capital.”

“That so?”

The rice crackers were based on the spring onion rice crackers I’d had in the city. I wrapped some of my favorite foods around each one to eat. Since the bandits weren’t doing it for themselves, I chose random ingredients to use with their crackers.

I gave the first one to the head bandit. His was a rice cracker wrapped with snowbird neck meat and cheese, with oyster sauce drizzled on top.

“Here you go.”

“Th-Thanks...”

If I had any vegetables, I could have added a nice, tasty crunch. But sadly, potatoes were my only option. I was still pleased with how well my makeshift dishes turned out either way.

The head bandit scrunched up his brow as he munched on the snowbird rice cracker.

“How is it?”

“...It’s real good.”

That was a relief. Since the bandits were used to eating disgusting food, I was worried my cooking wouldn’t suit their tastes. But surprisingly enough, it appeared that their tastebuds were still intact.

The cracker was nice and puffy, while the snowbird meat itself was firm—sure to be a delicious combination, even though I hadn’t actually tried it myself. I stacked toppings onto crackers for the other two men as well.

“It’s so good!”

“I can’t remember the last time I had a real meal like this!”

The head bandit ate five crackers in a row. It was proof that the men had accepted me as a true nobleman’s daughter.

This is going great... Well, okay, nothing about this is great!

I wanted to ask them how cooking a meal could possibly be proof of a person being from high society.

Once they finished eating, I was sure they were going to tie me up again. But instead, the bandits began to drink booze and left me where I was.

They roared with drunken glee as they enjoyed their post-meal drinks. But just then, their faces turned deadly serious.

As soon as they whisked their swords up off the floor, the door suddenly shattered into pieces.

“AAAHH...!”

My voice shook at the arrival of the late-night visitor. I was suddenly staring at a much scarier man than any of the bandits!



Terrifying. He's absolutely terrifying!

"None of you are gettin' away with this!"

"EEEEEEK!!"

"Why're *you* screaming?!"

Those words snapped me out of it. When I looked closer, I recognized the man.

"Captain Ludtink...!"

"Put that pot on your head and sit still."

After that simple order, the confrontation between bandits began. (My representative bandit was Captain Ludtink.) The four of them, with their brawny bodies, turned the atmosphere in the small room to one of intense pressure. It was a wondrous sight—four bandits with equally frightening looks on their faces.

I'd been thinking that Captain Ludtink didn't resemble a bandit as much as I first thought. But now that I saw him together with the real thing, he really *did* look like he belonged. Internally, I decided I could keep calling him a bandit without hesitation.

"What d'ya think you're doing, kidnapping our combat medic?!" he roared.

"This girl's a combat medic?!"

"Just *look* at her! Of course she is! You think she's out there battling?"

"I-Isn't she the earl's daughter?" the head bandit asked.

"She's clearly a Fore Elf, you idiots!"

They all turned to look at me. I removed the hood I'd been wearing to reveal my ears.

"What...?!"

"You little...!"

"You were lyin' to us?!"

The bandits stared at me in amazement. It was a shockingly late realization.

While they were distracted, I sidled over toward Captain Ludtink and dashed out of the house.

“Medic Risurisu!”

Vice Captain Velrey had been behind the captain. She pulled me to her and wrapped her arms around me. I felt all the tension in my heart melt away.

“I’m...so glad you’re safe...” she whispered.

“I am, thanks to you guys.”

Garr, Zara, and Ulgus were all there too. All of my squadmates had actually come to rescue me!

Zara stepped forward. “Vice Captain Velrey? May I borrow a sword?” he asked.

“Go ahead.”

He exchanged his battle ax for one of the vice captain’s dual blades and headed straight into the bandits’ house before I could figure out what was going on.

“Vice Captain? What’s Zara up to...?”

“It’s hard to use a battle ax indoors.”

“Oh, I see...”

I peeked inside the window, wondering if he’d be able to make do with just one sword.

“Zara’s really going to have his hands full with four gigantic bandits,” I murmured.

“Four bandits? I only see three. Is another one hiding somewhere?”

“Ah, I’m sorry! I was including Captain Ludtink in the bandit count.”

“Oh, I get it now.”

Even Vice Captain Velrey seemed to agree with my evaluation of the bandit-faced Captain Ludtink. *Good. I’m glad I’m not the only one who sees it!*

Through the window, I could see Captain Ludtink and Zara glaring intensely at

the three bandits.

The room was so packed, it'd probably be difficult for any more of us to join the battle.

"Ulgus might be able to fit in there," the vice captain muttered.

"Don't be so mean to me, Vice Captain Velrey..."

A few other knights from another squadron were sneaking through the back door to the kitchen.

Ulgus opened the window slightly and peered through as he whipped out his notebook. It appeared that he was taking notes for a written report.

"Um...Vice Captain Velrey?" I asked. "What exactly did the bandits demand from the earl?"

"Oh, that? Well, this area is the earl's territory, but these bandits moved in without permission five years ago..."

She went on to explain that they'd ignored repeated orders to leave. They were still hunting in the forests and even using blades to threaten the servants who approached them with messages from the earl.

"That's why their demand was to have the eviction notice retracted."

"Oh...what about ransom money?"

"No, they didn't want any."

Something suddenly felt strange to me. *Are those men really bandits?*

I peeked in at the men inside the room. They all had long beards, frightening glares, and weapons in their hands.

No, those are definitely bandits.

At this point, the knights had positioned themselves inside the kitchen.

Vice Captain Velrey gave the signal by tapping on the window lightly.

Just then, Captain Ludtink unsheathed his sword. The bandits shuddered with fear.

"We're endin' this here. If we beat you, you three have to leave this place."

“What did you just say?!”

That was the signal.

The head bandit raised his gigantic sword and went flying forward to attack.

Zara reacted first. He only had one of the short swords. Nervously, I watched on, hoping he would be all right.

The bandit’s sword was enormous and heavy-looking.

But in the end, I had no need to worry. Zara blocked the impact with his own blade.

I heard the sound of metal connecting with a loud clang.

Zara slipped away with his own sword and avoided the bandit’s path of attack.

“What?!”

The bandit’s eyes went wide—shocked by this twist. It was only the briefest of mistakes. But Zara quickly kicked the man in the stomach and sent him flying backward.

The bandit hit the wall with a loud thud, let out a cry of “Ugh!” and then fell still.

“Brother!!”

“Big Bro! What happened?!”

I realized that Zara had knocked out the oldest of the bunch. I never expected the three men to actually be brothers. But it didn’t really matter. I was prepared to see how they counterattacked, but instead, the bandits burst into tears.

“Waaaaah! How could it end like this?!”

“How could our Big Bro get beaten by the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen?!”

Zara’s not a pretty girl. He’s a pretty boy.

“He musta been distracted by her beauty!”

“It could happen to anybody!”

I imagined they would be happier not to know the truth.

After that, the knights in the kitchen entered the room and captured the bandits in the blink of an eye. They tied the men up and led them away in a single line. Captain Ludtink and Zara came back outside.

“Melly! Are you okay?” Zara suddenly wrapped his arms around me and squeezed a bit too tight.

“I-I’m fine. What about you, Zara?”

“Don’t you worry about me. Those men didn’t know a lick about how to fight.”

“Ah, so they really weren’t bandits after all?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Somehow, I just didn’t think they were bad people. I felt more like they were just three older men with scary faces who wanted to live off the land.

“Well, it’s still not good to kidnap people or live on land that isn’t yours.”

“Exactly. I was so pissed off about what they did to you, I couldn’t hold back, even though that guy was just an amateur.”

“He *did* have a weapon and all.”

“That was actually a woodcutting blade.”

“Wait, really?”

What I thought was a deadly weapon was actually something they kept for handiwork. I’d never seen such a large woodcutting blade in my village, which was why I didn’t expect it.

“Let’s get *going*, Medic Risurisu,” the captain said, clearly still very irritated over the whole affair.

“Ah, right!”

My kidnapping was over. The bandit-like old men were arrested and taken away by another squadron. Their destination was somewhere far away from the lodge.

Finally, I was free to go back to headquarters.

Light still spilled out from the lodge despite the late hour. They must've been unable to return home because of me. Just before I stepped inside, something hit me.

"Ah!"

Vice Captain Velrey looked at me. "What's the matter, Medic Risurisu?"

I was too shaken up to respond.

"Calm down. It'll be okay."

She gently stroked my back until, finally, I was able to speak again.

"I left my pot...at the bandits' hideout...!"

"Ah, the big one?"

She asked me if that pot meant something special to me and I shook my head. I simply needed it to cook our meals on expeditions; I was lost without it.

"Then let's go buy a new pot together sometime," she smiled. "I'm sure the Order will take care of the bill for that."

"R-Really?"

"Sure. Don't worry about it. Let's go shopping and pick a new one out."

It was perfect timing. *My pot getting scorched is what triggered this whole affair, after all...*

"I would love to!"

Yay! I get a new pot! I hoped I could find a nice one.

"A trader once told me," the vice captain went on, "that they sell wootz steel pots in the capital city."

"Wootz...? The steel they use for swords?"

Wootz was a type of steel with a wood-like texture, making it easy to haul around and difficult to burn.

"Wootz steel swords are already *very* rare, though," the vice captain went on. "I don't know if we'll find any wootz pots."

"I see."

They'd probably be very expensive if we did manage to stumble across one. *Those darn traders, lying to me about pots! Oh well... I'll just have to choose a lighter, easier-to-use pot this time.*

We were standing in the entrance of the lodge as we talked, but Captain Ludtink ordered us both inside.

"Dinner's already served. Eat up before we head home."

"All right!"

This reminded me that I hadn't eaten anything myself. My stomach let out a growl now that I was finally safe. I went to the cafeteria and met the knight who'd given me butter last time. He handed me a bowl of soup.

"You must've had it rough, huh?" he asked, smiling. "This ought to get your spirits up."

"Ahahaha... Sure..."

He dropped more butter into my bowl of clear soup.

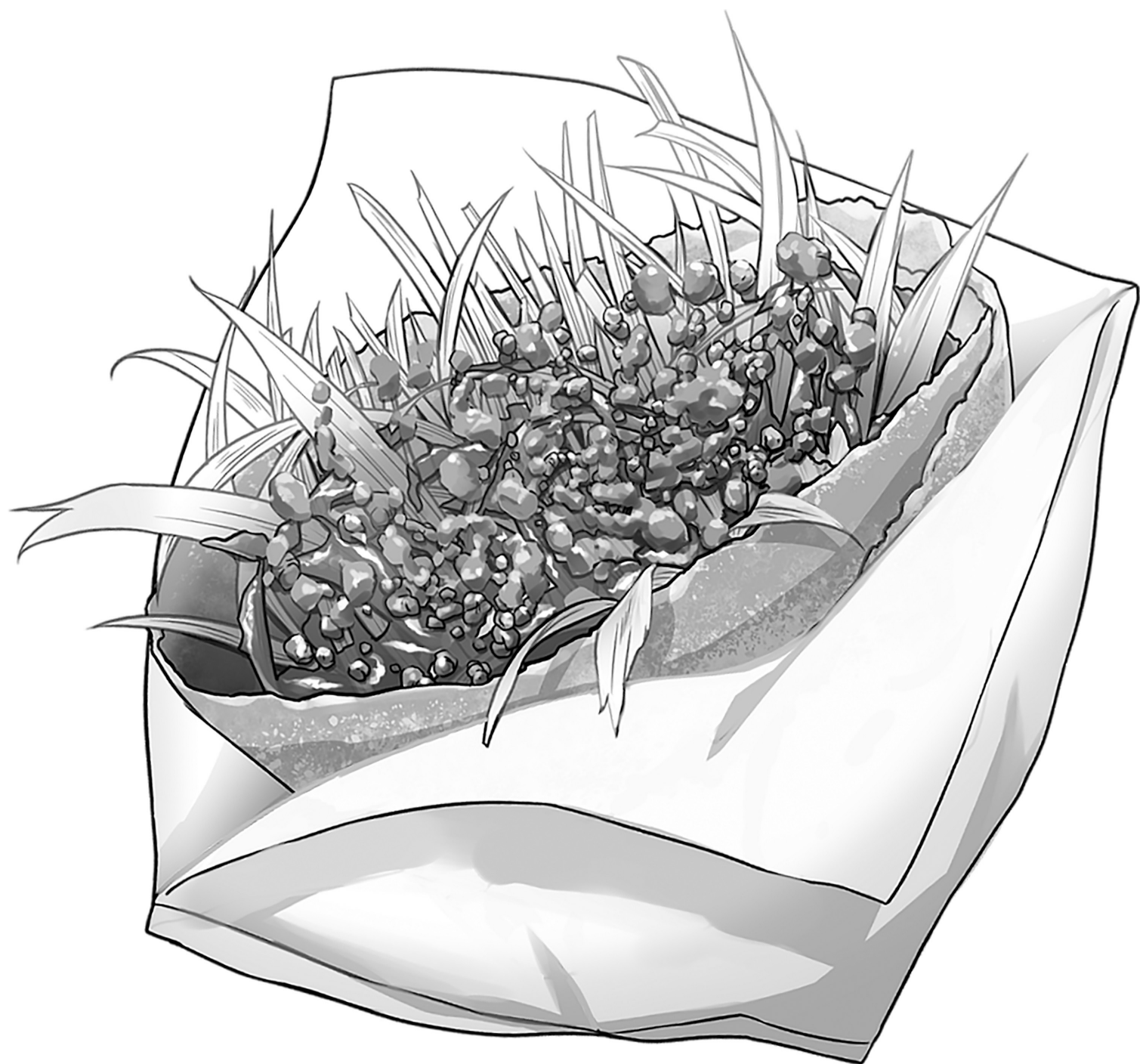
"O-Oh...!"

I never expected to eat butter soup like this again. But I *was* starving. So maybe it'd actually be a nice meal after everything that had happened...

"Urp...!" *Nope! Wrong!*

The sheer richness of the soup made my eyes roll back as soon as I tasted it. Ulgus, seated across from me, had the exact same expression on his face.

As it turned out, not even hunger could make the most disgusting foods even somewhat appetizing...



Chapter 4: Milk Stew with Leftovers

WE finally managed to make our way home to the capital. I hadn't taken a bath in three days. But once I returned to my dorm room, I was completely spent. The only thing I could bring myself to do was wash my face, hands, and feet before collapsing into bed.

Finally, my first day off after ten days of work! I'd never been so happy for a break in all my life.

My muscles were aching when I woke up the next morning. *How depressing.*

In the end, the wounded had been taken away by carriage while the rest of us traveled back by horse. Our expedition had been much more grueling than usual—this time, we'd had to climb a snowy mountain during a blizzard! It made sense I'd be this stiff.

Slowly, I managed to drag myself out of bed. I opened up the pocket watch I'd received upon joining the Order, and to my dismay, I saw that breakfast was already over. My depression only worsened.

I let out a sigh. My stomach started to growl.

I couldn't believe my luck, oversleeping through breakfast like that. There were still two more hours until lunch was served.

On top of that, I had no emergency rations in my room either. I had brought my personal stash of cookies and snacks with me when I heard we had a mission on such short notice, and I'd eaten them all over the course of the trip. My room was completely devoid of any food.

Disheartened, I slumped back down into bed.

I'll just sleep until lunchtime, since I'm still kind of sleepy. But— Grooooowl. My stomach made a sad gurgle. I sat up slowly and let out my second sigh of the day.

My only choice was to go out to town to eat.

I lit my fireplace and put some water on to boil. After wiping my body down, I changed into a gray dress, braided my hair, and tied it back into a bun.

Cold air wafted in through the window when I opened it, so I donned one of the overcoats the Altenburg family had provided the unit. Apparently, they were generous enough to let me take it home and use it whenever I wanted.

If only my gray dress underneath wasn't so unstylish. What a disappointment...

I had just been paid a few days ago, so I felt like shopping for new clothes. I also needed hair accessories and shoes.

Thinking about that reminded me of the brooch Captain Ludtink had bought me.

I took out the box and carefully unwrapped the paper. When I opened the lid, I breathed a sigh of relief. The brooch was a beautiful silver piece with five petals and a cluster of pearls in the very middle. I tried putting it on my gray dress, but it just didn't look right. *I'll have to buy some nice clothes to wear with it.*

I set the brooch back in the box, knowing I couldn't wear it today, then donned my cap before heading to town.

My first stop was the shopping district, not the market. The area wasn't very crowded, since it was late in the morning.

I had shopped here with Ulgus often, but it was my first time coming to buy personal items for myself. Before I'd received my pay, I had no money to shop with in the first place. Either way, I was always too tired to do anything other than space out in my bedroom whenever I had a day off. My body was still adapting to a knight's work.

But that's a problem for another time...

My heart raced with excitement over my very first solo shopping trip. Just then, I spotted a familiar back.

This person's silky, golden hair was tied up atop their head, and they stood

with perfect posture. Wearing a red overcoat and long skirt, they were quite tall for a woman...

“Wait...Zara?”

Thinking I must be mistaken, I rushed toward the person.

“Zaaaa!”

The beautiful man turned around when I called out to him.

“Well, well, well!” he cried. “If it isn’t Melly!”

“How funny, running into you here,” I said.

Zara was carrying bags in both hands—apparently, he was out shopping himself. He’d purchased enough food for the whole week.

“Are you here to shop too, Melly?” he asked.

“Um, well, not quite. I didn’t get to eat yet today...”

“Oh no!”

I was going to ask him for a good restaurant, but then Zara made a surprising offer.

“Why don’t you come over to my place? I started up a stew this morning.”

He explained that it was a stew made from leftover ingredients he had around his house, and he’d gone out shopping since he had no bread to eat it with.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“It’s totally fine. Who likes to eat all alone? Besides, this way you can give my house a good inspection.”

“Inspection?”

“You promised you’d come live with me, right?”

“Ah!”

I’d completely forgotten about the idea of moving in with Zara. But no other knights had approached me since then, so I felt like I was probably safe now.

“The knights only stay away because you’ve got me with you,” he chirped.

“Ah, uh, r-right.”

That much was true. Zara had waited for me every morning outside the women’s dormitory so that we could walk to work together. Any normal male knight would surely get scolded for loitering like that, but Zara blended in perfectly with the other women entering and exiting the dorm. Not only that, but I also often saw the female knights striking up friendly conversations with him too. No one minded him being around our dorm.

It always made me feel bad, relying on him so much like that.

Still, it was so strange how Zara fit in perfectly surrounded by female knights...

I felt too guilty to intrude on his day off. Zara had to be as tired as the rest of us.

Just as I was about to reject his offer, my empty stomach let out the poorest-timed gurgle in history.

“Oh dear, would you listen to that,” Zara remarked.

I was so embarrassed, I felt like my face would burst into flames.

“We should get going,” he said. “I just bought some freshly baked bread!”

Despite being made of leftovers, Zara seemed very confident in his stew. Hearing that, I couldn’t bring myself to turn him down.

“Let’s hurry,” he said. “It’s not far from here, but the bread will get cold if we take too long.”

“Huh? Oh...okay. Th-Thank you.”

That was how I ended up paying a visit to Zara’s house.



ZARA lived in a residential area not too far from the shopping district.

The street was filled with two-story houses, all painted various colors like yellow and red. It was a beautiful, vibrant street.

“This one’s me,” he said as we stopped in front of his home.

“Wow, what a lovely home you have!” I exclaimed.

“I’m only renting, actually.”

He explained the rent here wasn’t too high, and since the Order provided him a housing budget, he barely had to pay much at all.

“By the way, is your roommate home?” I asked.

“She sure is,” Zara replied.

“U-Um, does she mind if I come over?”

“Not at all. She’s pretty curious when it comes to strangers.”

With my heart racing, wondering if she’d like me, I took my first step into Zara’s house.

“I’m home, Blanche!”

So her name’s Blanche. I was excited to meet her, until...

“Meow!”

“AAAH!”

A gigantic white cat was waiting next to the front door. Zara turned back toward me, grinned, and introduced us.

“This is Blanche. She’s a mountain cat.”

“A mountain cat?!”

Mountain cats were humongous creatures who only lived in snowy regions to the north. I’d heard that, in some areas, they were kept as pets. But...

“Aren’t mountain cats mythical beasts?” I asked, eyeing the big cat.

“Yep, sure are,” Zara responded without missing a beat.

Mythical beasts were something like spirits and sprites combined into a single creature. In other words, they were very mysterious beings.

The mountain cat let out a cute “Meow!” She was way bigger than me—about the size of an adult man on all fours. I had heard that mountain cats were very docile, but seeing one up close in person was still frightening. Her coat was white as snow, fluffy, and so adora— *No, that’s not what matters right now!*

“D-Don’t tell me *this* is your roommate?!” I scoffed.

“Yep!”

“Y-You’re kidding!!”

He tricked me! His female roommate’s a mountain cat!

“Sorry it’s so messy in here, Melly. But come on in.”

Blanche was seated and staring at me. I didn’t feel as if she disliked me, judging by how she was wagging her tail.

“She’s sure keeping a close eye on you, Melly,” Zara teased.

“D-Don’t mind me...”

I tiptoed my way into the house, unable to stop myself from feeling frightened. I had never seen such a huge cat before.

Blanche wore something like a bib around her neck. It was cute and lacy, and I realized Zara might have made it for her.

“Meow!”

“Whoa!”

While I was busy staring at her, Blanche crept over and looked at my face. It startled me.

Zara laughed and told me not to worry.

“Come on in.”

“Ah, right! Thank you for having me.”

I slipped past Blanche to follow him to the kitchen.

His shelves were lined with dishes, his spices perfectly organized, and his stove was clean as a whistle. It was hard to believe this kitchen belonged to a single man. It was nothing like those bandit brothers’ place at all.

Even the weaving of his tablecloth was lovely. I let out an impressed whistle.

“That fabric comes from my homeland,” Zara said proudly.

“It’s so beautiful!”

The fabric was full of stitching depicting snowflakes, forest trees, and even

animals. We only did embroidery in my village, so the stitching looked incredible to me.

“I can’t do very detailed stitches, so embroidery is much more impressive to me,” he explained.

“Don’t be modest. This is very lovely.”

I couldn’t believe he was the one who made the tablecloth. I was terribly jealous of his skills.

While we were chatting, the stew became warm enough for us to eat. Zara made it with freshly delivered milk.

“You know how we were gone for a while? I was so busy that I forgot to tell the milkman I was going out on a mission. So when he showed up today, he gave me four days’ worth of milk.”

He had decided to make a stew with it, so he wouldn’t have to drink it all on his own. Dairy products were extremely rare in my village, so we never used them in things like stews.

“I sure hope you like it,” Zara said.

“Actually, I’ve never had a stew with milk in it before,” I confessed.

“Oh, really? You don’t say.”

We set the table with freshly baked bread and three-horned cow milk stew.

I caught a faint whiff of butter in the air. Side dishes of orange root vegetables and yellow beans made for a vivid splash of color on the table.

I gulped, nearly drooling at the unexpected feast. I prayed, and with that, it was finally time to eat.

“Go on, dig in,” Zara urged.

“Thank you for the amazing meal.”

I started by scooping out a big chunk of potato with my spoon.

The potato was warm and faintly sweet. It had absorbed the mellow taste of the thick milk inside the stew. Just chewing on it filled me with joy! I broke out into a big smile.

“It’s delicious, Zara!”

“Is it? I’m glad!”

The meat inside was smoked boar-pig—extra salty, but in a way that brought out the stew’s flavor.

I next reached for a bread roll. It was spongy on the outside and fluffy when I split it open, letting hot steam escape. I just loved the smell of wheat coming off it. Tearing off a bite-sized piece, I dunked it into my stew before eating it. The flavor was indescribable.



This tasted like it had to be the best stew in the whole city. Zara's stew was truly delicious. I finished my bowl in no time. I hadn't expected it to be restaurant-quality.

"Thank you for the meal," I said. "It was really incredible."

"Well, thank you ...But you're even more incredible, Melly," he said sincerely.

"Why's that?" I cocked my head to one side.

"You're able to cook while we're out on missions. I like cooking, but at times it feels like such a chore. And that's just when I'm cooking for myself. Cooking for others is such a pain."

"You think so?"

Cooking for others was the most natural thing in the world to me. In fact, I felt like I never cooked for just myself.

"That's why, to me," Zara continued, "cooking for someone else is an act of love."

"Love?" I'd never thought of it like that before.

"This doesn't apply to people like chefs who cook for a living," Zara said. "But you never cook for someone you don't care about, right?"

He had a point. Home cooking was something you did with others in mind. I cooked delicious meals for the Second Expeditionary Squadron because they worked so hard, and I wanted to help them be even stronger and more energized.

"That's why I was so happy when you made me that meatball stew, Melly," he said, smiling at me.

"I'm so glad to hear that." I blushed at his compliment.

I wasn't sure if my cooking was satisfactory enough at first, but now I was so glad I didn't give up. My heart began feeling warm.

I was determined to keep delivering my very best for them.



AFTER our meal, we washed the dishes together and drank some tea. Zara brought out oven-roasted meringue as a snack. The light-brown meringue dissolved in my mouth as soon as I bit into it.

It felt like a very...girly dessert.

Partaking in delicious tea and snacks was a perfect way to relax. The weather outside was lovely and my stomach was full. I couldn't be happier.

Zara shared the name of the store where he'd bought the tea and meringue, so I decided to buy some for myself on the way home.

I also needed to buy things like biscuits as emergency rations.

Zara told me he was going to spend the rest of the day relaxing. It sounded like a nice way to spend a day off.

"Still, I can't believe you have a pet mountain cat here," I exclaimed.

"My mom took Blanche in when I was eight years old. But the poor creature didn't like the cold, so I had to take her with me when I came to the city."

"Oh, I see."

Our kingdom operated under what was known as the Mythical Beast Protection Treaty.

The highest class of mythical beasts, dragons, were banned from breeding or making direct contact with humans.

The second class included sacred wolves, unicorns, gargoyles, mandrakes, and griffins. Only those with special licenses could interact with or breed them.

For the third class, anyone could keep them as pets so long as they applied for permission at their local city or town hall. This included mountain cats like Blanche, salamanders, tabby cats, and snow foxes.

Of course, anything classified as a mythical beast was different from normal kinds of pets. We had to form pacts with them to ensure they didn't harm people.

"Her food costs me a fortune," Zara sighed.

"I bet it does. How much does she eat?" I asked, looking over at the big cat

lying on the floor.

“A jar of honey every single day.”

“Oh! So no meat, then.”

That’s a mythical beast for you. I had heard that they mainly dined on snowdrops—flowers that bloomed in the wintertime. *They’re simply big docile cats who don’t even eat meat. How adorable!*

“She never leaves the fireplace during winter,” Zara went on, “and sometimes she still gets cold even in the summer. She hates walks, doesn’t like scratching posts, and refuses to eat unless I spoon-feed her. Blanche can be quite a handful.”

“What do you do with her when we have expeditions?” I asked.

“She stays with a friend of Captain Ludtink’s.”

“I see.”

He told me that a few other families in the capital kept pet mountain cats in their homes. But in order to prevent excessive capturing of the animals, very few breeders received official permission to sell mountain cats.

Between those limitations and the time and money it took to keep a mountain cat, it was a very rare pet to see in the capital.

“That friend must be a nobleman like Captain Ludtink, right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Zara explained that, in exchange for looking after Blanche, the other man had wanted to breed his cat with her if they appeared to be a good match. But things weren’t working out on that front.

“It seems like the male cat grew up spoiled, so she’s yet to view him as mate material,” he said.

“But the way you describe it, Blanche sounds kind of like a little princess herself.”

“Ha, you might be right about that,” Zara laughed.

They do say a child never knows the true feelings of their parents. But the two

cats got along fine as friends, so Zara wasn't worried about letting Blanche stay at the other cat's house while he was away.

"By the way, about Blanche's bib...or, I suppose, her apron?" I asked. "Did you make that, Zara?"

"I did! Cute, isn't it?"

"It is! You're very skilled."

"I make my own clothes, too, actually."

"Really? That's amazing!"

Zara described how, during snowy seasons in his hometown, it was impossible to do any work outside, so the only source of income for families was taking on indoor crafts. They did things like textile weaving, woodwork, embroidery, and shoe cobbling instead.

"Every family has their own inherited trade that we all start studying when we're kids," he explained. "Only the oldest son takes over the actual business, while their siblings sometimes go to other families to study their trades as well. I went from house to house, learning things like sewing, weaving, cooking, and all kinds of random skills."

"What does your family do for a living, Zara?" I asked.

"We're ax-makers. We even sell our axes here in the capital."

"That's neat..."

I was jealous to hear how many paths he'd been offered in life. It made me realize just how closed-off my village was to the rest of the world.

"Oh, I know!" Zara said suddenly. "Let me show you some of my other fabrics too."

"You have more?"

What Zara led me to was an entire sewing room. I took in the sight of the mannequins, sewing machines, and his desk covered in rough design sketches.

This is the real deal!

"Wow, look at all this!"

“Sorry it’s so messy in here...” he apologized.

“No, it’s perfect the way it is!”

This was the kind of room that young girls dreamed about.

The shelves were packed with colorful pieces of cloth. I noticed smaller boxes of lace and thread too. Just looking at them made my heart race with excitement.

“It’s like a fabric store!” I exclaimed.

“I always end up buying too many things when I shop. It’s a disease.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

Every woman had likely experienced the urge to purchase tons of fabric they had no plans to use whenever the traders came to town. Zara and I stood there and took in the sights of this special room.

I started feeling the itch to buy some nice fabrics and make myself some clothes.

“We should go fabric shopping together sometime,” Zara said, grinning.

“I’d love that!”

It was yet another thing to look forward to. I’d have to work hard at my job to save up for fancy fabrics and lace.

Zara joined me for the rest of my shopping after that.

I bought some sweets for emergency rations, had Zara pick out a dress for me at a boutique, and finally, he led me to the caramel nut pie shop he had told me about before.

The restaurant was packed with young ladies from the upper classes and middle-aged women. A long line extended outside, full of what looked like servants waiting so their masters wouldn’t have to stand around.

“Well, what should we do, Melly?” Zara asked me.

“Let’s get in line.”

Since we were already there, I definitely wanted to eat some pie, even if it

meant waiting.

“Ah! But only if you don’t mind, Zara,” I quickly added.

“Not at all. I’m eager to try some too.”

“Let’s do it, then.”

After a full hour of waiting, we finally made it into the shop. Fences separated the spaces between tables, giving the interior a calming atmosphere. *Maybe this is the secret to their success.*

The waiter brought us menus, which shocked me: they had over twenty kinds of sweets alone!

“I always want steamed potatoes whenever I have pie,” I said.

“Me too,” Zara grinned.

I was so thrilled to learn that they served salty dishes here too. I ended up ordering black tea, caramel nut pie, and steamed potatoes.

While we waited, I gazed at the front entrance, watching girl after girl come through the door.

“I guess women really *are* the only ones who come here,” I said.

“Right? I’ve always had to stare at this place from the outside,” Zara replied.

The sweet scent of caramel wafted all the way out to the street. I imagined how hard it must be to pass by this shop all the time.

When the waiter brought me my black tea, I downed it in one gulp and took a deep breath. Zara seemed equally relieved somehow. I apologized for dragging him along on my shopping trip, but he shook his head at me.

“This is actually kind of...therapeutic. I’ve been having some...love life problems lately,” he murmured quietly.

I remembered how he’d said the aggressive customers at the restaurant were what made him rejoin the Royal Order.

Zara explained that his female friends would ask him to pose as their boyfriend so that they could reject relationships with other men. But now, they were starting to pursue Zara himself, and he wasn’t sure how to handle it.

“Considering the way I look,” he sighed, “I never thought they’d actually see me that way.”

“I see...”

“I just wanted to be friends with them...”

I knew he must want to be treated like one of the girls in his friendships, but that didn’t seem possible with these women.

These kinds of adult problems didn’t make much sense to me. The way I saw it, it had to be something like...Zara could speak and act like one of the girls, but his female friends started to only see him as a man after a while. That changed how they felt about him, making them want to date rather than just be friends.

“Can’t men and women ever be just friends?” he murmured sadly.

It was a bit forward of me, but seeing Zara in that state made me feel like I had to say it.

“Um...I’d like to be your friend, Zara!”

“Oh, but that’s not—”

“Thank you for waiting.”

Our long-awaited caramel nut pies had finally arrived. I leaned over, entranced by the sight of the dessert.

“Wow, it looks so good!” I cried.

“It really does,” Zara agreed.

My slice’s surface was caramelized and sparkled in the light. It was about the size of my fist. When I stuck my knife in, I felt the crisp crust give way, as well as a lumpy sensation toward the bottom.

“There’s a whole layer of nuts at the base,” I said upon this discovery.

I quickly stuck my first bite in my mouth.

The top was exactly as delicious as I expected, being covered in a layer of crispy caramel. The crust itself was satisfyingly flaky. I especially loved the strong taste of butter left on my tongue. The inside was filled with a bounty of custard cream.

I wondered if the nuts were roasted alone before being baked in the pie, judging by how flavorful they were. The faint taste of salt was the perfect finishing touch to the sweet pie.

With my fork in one hand and my other pressed to my cheek, I let out a satisfied sigh.

“This is pure bliss!”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Zara.

Once my mouth was coated in sugar, I moved on to the spiced, roasted potatoes.

The salty snack after such a sweet dessert was mind-numbingly delicious.

I ended up eating my whole meal in the blink of an eye. Caramel nut pie was truly a treat worth waiting for.



MY pleasant day off ended all too soon. The next day, it was back to work again.

My afternoon schedule was to go shopping with Vice Captain Velrey for a pot to use on expeditions.

As for the morning, I headed off toward a combat medic seminar. I was really excited for it!

The seminar today had a guest speaker—a Royal Order doctor who’d teach us the latest care methods. When I arrived in the lecture room, it was filled with nothing but brawny old men. I realized that it was better if combat medics were physically strong, so that they could carry the wounded and all their heavy medical equipment around.

I also spotted a few old men wearing magic-conducting accessories on their bodies. They had to be sorcerers capable of healing magic.

For today’s seminar, each unit sent a single representative to attend, meaning those gathered here were the best of the best.

Feeling timid in their overwhelming presence, I muttered a single “Hello” only

to have everyone's eyes turn on me at once. I awkwardly made my way to a chair at the very end of one row of tables.

The lecturer arrived right on time.

"Good morning, everyone."

He appeared to be in his late twenties and wore glasses. He introduced himself as Wendell Shocola. With a friendly smile on his face, he began the lesson.

"Today, I'm going to teach you about the embalming process."

Everyone was taken aback by the unfamiliar word. One of the combat medics in the front piped up.

"Doctor, what exactly is 'embalming?'"

"It's a method of preserving and restoring decaying corpses that we learned from another world." The doctor kept a smile on his face as he explained.

On the other hand, the old combat medics and I couldn't pick our jaws up off the floor. Dr. Shocola continued on, not seeming to pick up the mood in the room.

"The deceased's surviving family will also be happier to receive a nicer corpse! What I'll be teaching you today are state-of-the-art techniques."

I couldn't believe that, despite working a job that revolved around saving lives, we were about to study the proper care for corpses! *Well, maybe this is just as important in our field...*

Dr. Shocola grinned as he opened a textbook.

"First, clean off any leaking innards from the wounds and stitch them up neatly. *Ah!* You can always stitch up a wound on a corpse, because they're already dead."

Not all combat medics were allowed to stitch wounds. We were divided into three different tiers.

First-tier medics could stitch up wounds.

Second-tier medics were allowed to administer painkillers.

Third-tier medics could only stop wounds from bleeding, sterilize them, and apply ointment and bandages.

I was only third-tier, but I wanted to study in my free time in hopes of moving up. Higher-tier medics gave their squadmates higher survival rates, and their pay was much better too.

Dr. Shocola paid the horrified medics no mind and kept on casually explaining the embalming process.

“The first step,” he said, “is to prevent decomposition by draining the blood... which will be difficult to do on the battlefield, so we’ll be injecting some enchanted medicine instead.”

We were given vials of this enchanted, decomposition-delaying purple liquid. This was what we were supposed to inject into corpses at multiple locations.

“If their face is stiffened with pain,” Dr. Shocola explained, “then please massage them gently to relax their expression.”

We were told to sterilize the corpses’ entire bodies with liquid and sew their clothes back together if torn. If the bodies were gaunt and pale, we could use medicine to restore them as well.

The old men in the room remained horrified by the whole process. But the more I heard about it, the more impressed I became.

I had once heard that nearly a hundred knights lost their lives every year while battling monsters. As a combat medic, it wasn’t at all unthinkable that I’d witness death with my own eyes someday. There wasn’t much that those of us who weren’t trained doctors could do.

Of course, there was nothing in the world that’d ease the grief and suffering of the bereaved family. But maybe, seeing their loved one as they remembered them one last time would give them the slightest bit of relief.

That was how I saw it, anyway. Not that I wanted to do any embalming myself.

We ended up spending four hours listening to the entire embalming process.

The other medics were pale in the face as they left the lecture room. I hadn’t

expected them to be so sensitive.

Just as I was about to stand up, Dr. Shocola called out to me.

“Say, are you a Fore Elf?” he asked.

“Ah! Yes...I am.”

“I see...” He stared at me, wrinkling his brow.

“Um...can I help you?”

“I like to learn about different species.”

“No, thank you.”

“I didn’t ask anything yet...”

I had a bad feeling about this whole interaction. But I decided to listen to him, just in case.

“If you happen to pass away on the battlefield,” he said, “with your permission, would you let me do your autopsy?”

“Sorry, but my corpse has already been claimed.”

“ALREADY?! Blast, they beat me to it!”

I bowed to him and made a mad dash for the door. My intuition had been right. Not that anyone else actually *had* dibs on my corpse, of course.

My first impression of the doctor was that he was a bit strange but had simply wanted to share information that would help the knights of the Order. But I was wrong. So wrong.

The entire lecture had really been just a chance for Dr. Shocola to talk about his...hobby.

I silently prayed our paths would never cross again.

After that, I decided to eat an early lunch.

It wasn’t time for the Order’s mandatory lunchbreak yet, so the only people in the cafeteria were the combat medics. Their faces looked as dark as they had earlier...actually, maybe even worse.

What’s wrong now?

It quickly became clear to me.

“Today’s lunch: Offal stew.”

...Nope. I don’t think so.

I wasn’t as sensitive as the others. But just like them, I’d spent the last four hours looking at illustrations of human innards sticking out of corpses.

Knowing I wasn’t going to be able to get any offal stew down, I did an about-face and headed back to the barracks. I nibbled on some baked goods Zara had given me instead.

My appetite never returned, so I went without lunch.



LATER, although we were supposed to be out shopping, Vice Captain Velrey suddenly had to run to an emergency meeting, telling me we’d leave after. I decided to mend my squadmates’ coats while I waited for her.

All of their clothes were quick to fall apart on expeditions. They ended up torn by branches, ripped during battle, and messed up in all kinds of ways. Captain Ludtink’s clothes were the worst of all.

He was a large man with a heavy coat. Its ends were frayed, a few buttons were missing, and the inner pocket was damaged enough to be unusable. I did my best to mend them all. On the captain’s inner pocket, I sewed on the mountain-cat-shaped appliqué that Zara and I had made as a joke the other day.

I sewed and sewed, and before I knew it, the workday was an hour away from ending. It was then that Vice Captain Velrey finally returned.

“Sorry I’m late, Medic Risurisu,” she apologized.

“It’s all right.”

It’s a bit too late to go shopping in town now, right? But as I considered this, Vice Captain Velrey made a suggestion.

“Why don’t we go pot shopping and go home from there instead of coming back to work?” She also offered to buy me dinner as an apology for being so

late. My stomach remembered it hadn't been fed any lunch, so it gurgled loudly.

"A-Are you sure?" I asked.

"Of course. I want to repay you for all the hard work you've been putting in."

"Oh, I don't do that much...but thank you."

With that, we headed right out to go pot shopping. I left Captain Ludtink's coat draped over a chair.

The town was already glowing orange as the sun set in the sky. The people on the street were moving faster than usual, eager to get home.

We were headed for a hardware store in the shopping district, racing to get there before they closed for the day.

Luckily, we arrived just in time and asked the shopkeeper out front to show us their pots.

"What kind of pot are you looking for today?" he asked.

"Um, do you have any wootz steel pots?" I replied.

"Unfortunately, we don't sell that...nor does any other shop in the capital city."

"I-I knew it..."

He explained that wootz steel pots were things from fairy tales written long ago and that they didn't actually exist in real life. Wootz steel was used for swords on occasion, but the price was incredibly high compared to the norm.

"I'm surprised you've heard of wootz steel pots at all," he said.

"The traders who came to my village always used to tell us about..." I paused. "Actually, now that I think about it, they were probably just reciting the things from the stories."

"I'd imagine so," the shopkeeper told me.

How embarrassing...!

"Perhaps a dwarf would make me one if I paid them a small fortune."

“A dwarf...?”

Dwarves were a race of tiny humanoids who specialized in extremely detailed crafts. They lived deep in the woods, just like Fore Elves did. Many of them were moody, and it wasn't unusual to hear stories of them turning away adventurers who visited to request special weapons and armor.

However, dwarves only did the actual manufacturing work; I'd have to obtain the raw materials myself.

I didn't have the slightest idea where to obtain wootz steel. I'd have to just give up on the whole idea.

“Then I'll take a lightweight pot that can feed up to six people,” I said determinedly.

“Coming right up.”

Vice Captain Velrey and I debated the pros and cons of each pot as we looked at them together.

“You'll want something light enough to carry around with you, right, Medic Risurisu?” she asked.

“But wouldn't it be better to be a bit heavier so that I can use it as a shield too?”

She stared at me when she heard that response.

“You've got *us* there to protect you, Medic Risurisu. You don't have to worry about that sort of thing.”

“Ah, right! Thank you.”

Seeing her look me right in the eyes and tell me she'd protect me made me feel a bit shy. I couldn't help but feel she was the coolest, most manly knight I knew—even though she was a woman.

We ended up choosing a copper pot with high heat conductivity. The shopkeeper recommended it, saying the material wouldn't scorch as badly and would cut down on cooking time.

Excitedly, I wrapped my arms around my new pot. I was glad I got to pick it

out of a large selection, instead of having to compromise and buy the first one I came across. The shopkeeper was kind enough to keep helping us even a bit after closing time too. My heart filled with joy as he rang it up.

After that, Vice Captain Velrey invited me out to eat. The restaurant was filled with old men, since their specialty was chicken skewers.

“The roast offal here is great,” she said happily.

“Offal...” I sighed.

Today seemed to be nothing but awful offal. But I was fine with that now, so I ate the cuts that Vice Captain Velrey recommended.

“How is it?”

The offal, which already had a nice texture, was soaked in the restaurant’s secret sweet and salty sauce. They also served offal and vegetable soup, which was popular here. It was equally as delicious as the grilled kind. Though I usually couldn’t handle my alcohol at all, I ended up ordering a glass for myself as the loud, bustling restaurant made me feel like letting loose. After my first glass, I ordered another one too.

“Is there anything you’re struggling with, Medic Risurisu?” Vice Captain Velrey asked me suddenly.

“Not at all! Everyone treats me very well.”

“That’s good. But if something’s ever on your mind, you can always come talk to me.”

“Thank you very much.”

Vice Captain Velrey praised my hard work after that. It made me feel sort of embarrassed.

“But don’t overdo it,” she said firmly. “You should come to us for help if you need it, because it’s never good to struggle with things alone. I want our unit to be one that can step in to help each other.”

Giving anything less than one’s full effort was unthinkable in the Fore Elf village. But in the Second Expeditionary Squadron, Velrey explained, the members supported each other and made up for our respective shortcomings.

I still had a long way to go, but I was prepared to do whatever I was capable of for my squad.

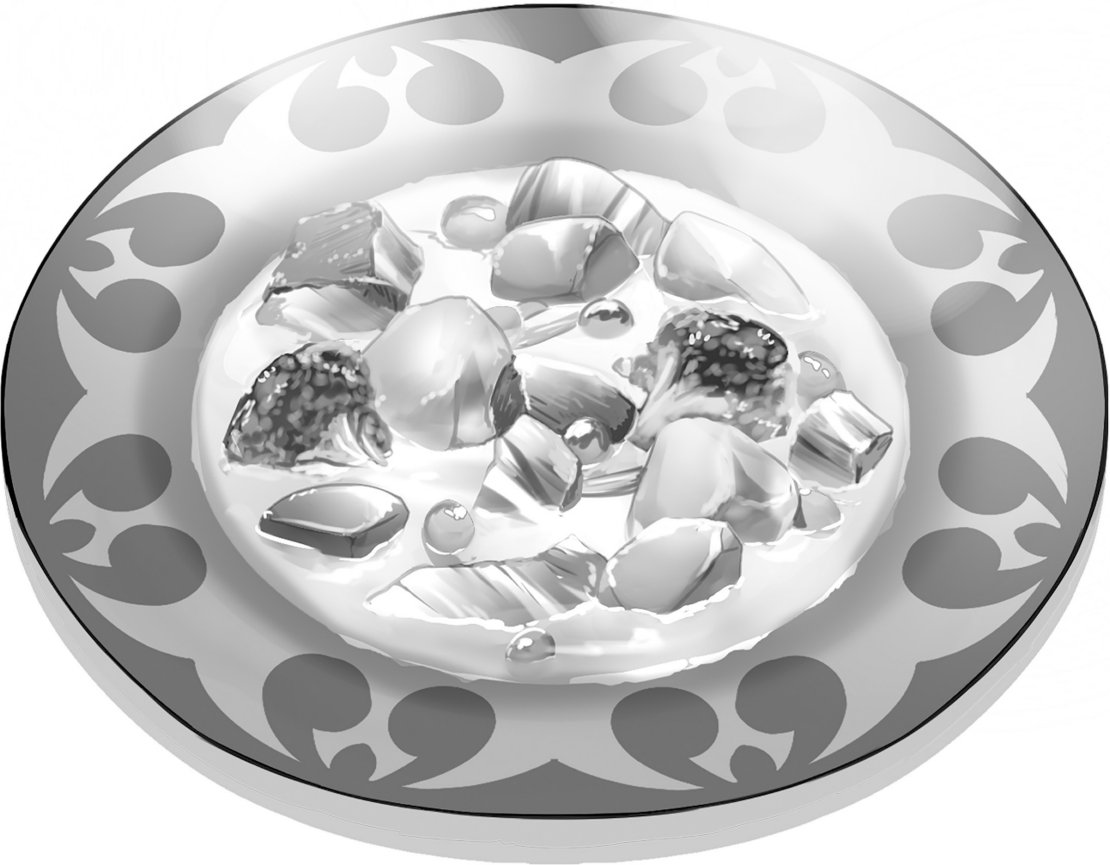
“Vice Captain, I’m going to work to be the best knight I possibly can.”

“I know you will.”

She told me to make sure I was eating properly, since a knight’s body was their livelihood.

I’d been eating so well lately, I *had* noticed some...expansion in a few areas.

But as far as that was concerned, I decided ignorance would have to be bliss.



Chapter 5: Are Princesses Made of Sugar?

AN expeditionary squadron's main duty was to travel outside the city and eliminate monsters. But occasionally, they received other orders as well. I learned this at tonight's evening meeting.

"You'll have the day off tomorrow," Captain Ludtink declared.

"Woohoo!" Ulgus cheered.

"In return," the captain went on, "you'll be spending the night as guards at an evening ball."

"Huh?! That's not a day off at all!!" Ulgus cried in pure despair. But the captain didn't hesitate to snap back.

"Keep your mouth shut when your boss is talking to you!"

"Y-Yes, sir!!" Ulgus squeaked back as Captain Ludtink grabbed his cheek.

It turned out that a neighboring country's princess had suddenly decided to attend this ball, so they needed more knights on the premises for protection.

"Take the afternoon off," Captain Ludtink went on, "then show up for guard duty tomorrow evening. You'll be working until midnight. The next day will be work as normal."

I was no Ulgus, but I was about ready to sob. I really wanted the next day off to rest.

"We'll work in pairs of two," the captain said.

How exactly are we going to pair off?

I felt like, as a squad, we were pretty well-balanced in terms of skills.

Captain Ludtink was a skilled commander and a force to be reckoned with when he attacked with his longsword.

Vice Captain Velrey was nimble and could land plenty of hits with her dual swords.

Garr had impeccable senses that made him very aware of our surroundings, and alongside his great strength, his spear was a powerful weapon.

Ulgus's arrows never failed to hit their mark, even at great distances.

Zara, with his battle ax, excelled at both offense and defense.

...It hit me that I might not be strictly *needed* for guard duty. I couldn't exactly help them if trouble arose. *But perhaps it's important to have as many knights on the scene as possible, even if just for show...*

"As for our pairs...I'll be with Risurisu."

"Whaaaat?!" The yell slipped out of my mouth.

Maybe, somewhere deep inside, Captain Ludtink was the only person I hoped not to be paired with.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?!" he growled at me.

"My apologies! I didn't mean to share my disappointment!"

"You disrespectful little...!!"

With his terrifying bandit face, I really felt like Captain Ludtink was going to be a magnet for trouble at the ball.

"Think about the balance of combat power in our unit," he said, clearly annoyed. "The two of us *have* to pair up."

"Yes, I couldn't agree more, most honorable Captain Ludtink," I said with mock formality.

"Just shut up and stick with me," he snapped.

"Aye, aye, sir..."

The other pairs consisted of Vice Captain Velrey and Ulgus—a *little brother, big sister combo*, I thought—and Zara and Garr—a *real beauty and the beast pair*...

"Risurisu and I will be inside the venue," the captain went on. "Velrey and Ulgus will be in the lookout tower, and Zara and Garr will patrol the gardens."

We were all stationed at different points instead of being together. But still, I

was a little bit excited.

Never in my life had I imagined I'd get to witness a swanky upper-class party. Beautiful dresses, princesses, sparkling chandeliers... I couldn't wait to take it all in!

"Be sure to arrive in your ceremonial uniform," Captain Ludtink added.

Knights were provided a uniform for normal duties and a white, formal outfit for ceremonies. I hadn't had a chance to wear mine yet, but I was thrilled to finally have the opportunity to dress up.

Ah!! Just then, I remembered something awful.

The uniform I had been given was too large and I'd have to make some alterations. Even the smallest size was too big on me, so I'd have to take it in quite a bit.

That would have to be top priority when I went home tonight. I always knew it was something I needed to take care of, but I was always so exhausted and unmotivated on my days off or used them to shop, so I kept putting it off.

Who knew it would come back to haunt me like this? Grrr...

Once Captain Ludtink finished speaking, our workday was done. I let out a sigh, slumped my shoulders, and turned on my heel.

"What's the matter, Melly?" Zara asked me from behind.

I explained that I'd have to go straight home to hem my uniform.

"Why don't you come over with it tomorrow and I'll lend a hand?" he offered.

"What?! You don't have to!"

Handiwork was Zara's hobby, so he was much better at it than me. But I still felt guilty asking for his help.

"I don't mind at all," he smiled. "It's not like I'll have anything else to do!"

"Thank you so much. Um, then, as long as you don't mind..."

"Sure thing; let's do it!"



ONCE I returned to my dorm room, I decided to make sweets to take to Zara's house tomorrow to thank him. I headed straight to the shared dorm kitchen.

The base ingredient was oats. I always ended up buying a lot of them since they were so cheap, and oats had plenty of fiber and nutrients.

Long ago, it was known as a kind of wheat that only blackbirds ate, so it was mainly used for livestock feed. But within recent years, tastes had changed, and it was now a popular food.

The old woman at the cafeteria shared some butter, sugar, and eggs with me. They always sold their leftover ingredients for cheap.

I added the butter, eggs, and sugar into a bowl and mixed them till the dough was nice and smooth. Next, I added the oats. Once the mixture was an even consistency, I added some crushed nuts and mixed it all up again.

The dough needed to rest for an hour so that the consistency would be less dry. After that was done, I oiled up an iron grill and cut off pieces of the dough. I was sure not to forget to flatten them on the grill so that they'd cook more easily.

A delicious scent filled the kitchen. I flipped through the pages of a reference book on dental hygiene, quietly passing the time.

The result was a batch of freshly baked oat cookies. I picked one up to test its flavor.

My teeth broke through the crisp surface with a crunch, filling my mouth with the taste of roasted nuts. The flavors were simple, meaning I could eat cookie after cookie and never get sick of them. I was really pleased with my work.

When they were nice and cool, I scooped them into a bag. *Now I won't have to worry about bringing something extra as a thank-you present.*

With the rest of my day, I took a nice bath and spent my time relaxing.



THE next morning, I put on the white dress I had bought recently and headed to Zara's house.

With my uniform and a bag of cookies, I left the dorm and traveled through

the center of town, heading for the residential district...when I suddenly slammed into a young woman who was racing around a corner.

“Eek!”

“Oof!”

The sudden impact sent me flying to the ground.

“Oh my goodness! Are you okay?!” the woman asked.

“Y-You betcha...” For some reason, the first words out of my mouth sounded like something an old man from the countryside would say. It was slightly embarrassing.

The woman reached her hand out to me.

“Thank you very m—” I started to say. But then...

“There ya are! We got ya now!!”

“You ain’t gettin’ away!!”

A group of muscular men, distinctly thuggish-looking with scars on their faces, closed the distance between us.

The woman who bumped into me had blonde hair, blue eyes, and was wearing a fancy dress. She was quite beautiful; I knew she must come from a very well-off family.

I couldn’t believe she was walking around unescorted. And what exactly had she done?

I stepped in between the brawny men and the woman.

“Who the hell’re you?!” one of them snarled.

“Um, actually, as you can see...” I held up my bracelet—something all knights wore to display their title. The men immediately calmed down.

“Now, what’s going on here?” I asked.

“Miss knight,” one of the men said, trying to hold back his anger. “This girl tried to dine and dash from our restaurant!”

“She ate enough for three people!” one of the other men chimed in.

"I-I see..." I said. She looked pretty slender to me, so that level of gluttony was surprising.

"I'm...not from around here..." the woman said haltingly. "So I..."

Ah, I get it. She doesn't know how to pay a bill. She's probably a noblewoman here for the ball.

"Very well," I said, taking out my wallet. "I'll pay this woman's bill for her. How much does she owe?"

"One silver coin," the first man said sharply.

"Wow... All right..."

Oh my, she really filled up, didn't she?

As scary as the men appeared, it seemed they were just humble restaurateurs wanting fair pay for their work. I handed over the silver coin, as much as that pained me; it was a *lot* of money.

Satisfied, the men left us. The situation resolved, I sighed in relief. *When I put in the effort, I'm just as capable of being a proper knight as anyone else. Although maybe it was the power of money that won the day here...*

"E-Excuse me..."

I turned around to see the woman looking at me guiltily.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "You're not hurt?"

"N-No, I'm fine," she said.

"Thank goodness." Still, I couldn't shake the feeling of concern for her. "Were you heading somewhere in particular?" I asked.

"Actually," she said, "I'm rather lost..."

"I see."

She confirmed my hunch that she was from a noble family, saying she was on her way to the royal palace, where she'd be staying.

"A carriage to the palace would take about ten minutes," I said. "You can find a carriage right over th—"

“Do carriages cost money?”

“Yes...”

At that, she hung her head. *She must not have any money on her...*

“Well...” I said finally. “It will take about thirty minutes to walk there. Would you like me to escort you?”

“Really?! You will?!” she cried.

“Certainly!” I smiled.

I felt bad for being late to Zara’s, but I couldn’t just leave this woman here alone. We ended up walking all the way to the palace together.



ONE hour later, I finally arrived at Zara’s house.

“Melly!!” he cried when he saw me. He was actually standing out front waiting for me. “Thank God...”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “There was a bit of a situation...”

“Is that so...? I was thinking of going out to search for you.” He sounded like he’d been really worried about me. “Well, anyway,” he said, clearly happy to see me. “Come on in.”

“Thank you for having me over,” I said. But as soon as I stepped inside the house...

“Mraw!”

Out came Blanche the mountain cat, still as gigantic as ever.

She raised one paw as if to greet me, so I bowed and greeted her back with a “Hello.” She responded with a “Meow!” of her own.

Zara made some tea for us, so I went ahead and handed over the oat cookies I’d made.

“This was my very first time making oat cookies,” I said. “I just hope you like them.”

“You made these for me? I’m so happy! Thank you, Melly.”

I sighed in relief that he liked my gift. I explained what had happened on my way over as we sat down to drink our tea.

“...And that’s why I got here so late,” I finished.

The young woman had told me she’d snuck past her guards and maids to explore the town. *That doesn’t sound very safe to me. I hope she’ll be all right.*

“So, what happened with the money you gave them?” Zara asked.

“Don’t worry, she paid me back.”

The girl seemed to feel very guilty about taking my money and had tried her hardest to pay me back with significant interest.

“I only gave her one silver coin,” I explained. “But she tried to give me ten gold ones...”

“Oh my!”

I’d refused the offer, of course.

“Sounds like you’ve had a bad day, Melly,” Zara opined.

“Not at all! I’m barely a knight, but I’m still a knight!” I boasted.

It felt like the very first time I’d ever acted like a true knight. In fact, it even boosted my self-confidence a bit.

“It was kind of emotional for me, actually...” I said. “I realized even someone like me could rescue others.”

“You sure can,” Zara beamed. “You’re a wonderful knight as far as I’m concerned.”

“Zara...”

It made me so happy to hear him say that.

“Anyway!” Zara clapped his hands and stood up. “If we sit around and chat all day, we won’t be ready in time for tonight.”

“Oh, that’s right!”

I worked on stitching my jacket while Zara did the same for my pants.

We spent two hours altering my uniform until a gurgle in my stomach

snapped me out of my sewing trance.

“What say we stop for lunch?” Zara asked, clearly trying not to grin. “I whipped us up a minced meat and potato pie.”

“Yay!”

Zara hadn’t cooked the pie yet, so I waited excitedly as it roasted in the oven. Fifteen minutes later, we were staring down at a crisp, golden-brown pie.

“Thanks for waiting,” Zara said as he got out a knife to cut it.

“It looks amazing!”

The latticed pie crust was glistening in the light as Zara sliced into it.

“Here you go,” he said, handing me a piece.

“Thank you so much!”

I looked at the slice horizontally, taking in the perfect layers of potatoes and minced meat.

With the meat and potato pie before me, I said my pre-meal prayer.

Thank you, gods, for blessing me with this delicious food!

“Time to dig in!” I beamed.

“Yep, eat up!” agreed Zara.

I dug my fork into the slice. The outer crust was nice and flaky, but the inside was soaked in gravy. I could hardly form words worthy of the savory meat and the texture of the soft, steaming potatoes.

“It’s delicious, Zara!” I cried.

“Is it? I’m glad to hear it.”

If I’d had the resources to support a family, I might’ve shouted “Please marry me!” right then and there. That’s how incredible the pie was!

Zara grinned as he listened to my gushing praise. He was so smart and kind, I imagined he’d make a brilliant wife someday.

Wait, no, I mean husband!

After getting my fill of Zara's cooking, we went back to finish up the work on my outfit, managing to wrap up before the sun set.

"Thank you so much for your help today," I said happily.

"It's my pleasure," he beamed. "I had a lot of fun."

Ahh, Zara is so kind... He spent his day off helping me and even said it was fun...

"See you later," Zara smiled.

"Oh, right!"

I'd almost forgotten that we still had a mission tonight. My plan then was to take a short nap and head to work afterward.

I said my goodbyes and returned to my dorm room.



A few hours later...

"yawn..."

My body felt...*heavy*. Probably from hunching over in the same position and sewing for hours. A nap wasn't enough! I wanted to go back to sleep so badly. But I had a job to do...

Still, if only I wasn't paired up with Captain Ludtink! Zara and I could've spent all night chatting about all the cute dresses, ribbons, and lace... But no, this ball wasn't for fun—it was work.

I patted my cheeks to get myself motivated. I braided my hair on both sides and tied it up in a bun on the back of my head. After that, I did my makeup, using a bit more than usual.

My heart began speeding a bit when I stuck my arm through the white sleeve of my uniform.

Unlike our usual uniforms, gold ornaments adorned the shirt and its buttons were gold too. I even got to carry a decorated sword in a white sheath. It was still a real sword, so there would be a proper blade if I pulled it out by the handle. I even got to wear a cape!

Feeling nice and fancy in my outfit, I went to my mirror and twirled around. *Yeah, not bad at all!* I smiled at my reflection.

With that, I left my dorm before I wound up running late.



“MELLY!” A voice called to me as soon as I’d left the front gates.

I looked over to see a dashing prince standing there.

“Wow, Zara!”

He was *stunning* in his formal wear. I couldn’t help but stare at him. Unlike usual, his hair was tied back in a single braid.

“The formal uniform looks so nice on you,” I gushed.

“You too, Melly. You look so gallant!” he beamed.

“Thank you for saying so!”

But there was no time for us to stand around and blush at each other. We had to get to the palace.

Every woman who passed by us turned their head to stare at Zara. I understood *exactly* where they were coming from.

The closer we drew to the palace, the more festive the atmosphere became. I could see dress-clad noblewomen getting out of their carriages.

Still, I couldn’t believe how crowded it was. I had to be careful not to get separated from Zara. And when we finally managed to make it to the meet-up spot, I got another surprise.

The members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron usually looked like ruffians. Now, however...in their brilliant white uniforms, each and every one of them looked like the truest of knights.

Even Captain Ludtink looked so much better. *He’s like some kind of bandit knight now. How lovely!*

“Risurisu,” he said curtly as he saw me staring. “You’re thinkin’ something rude again, aren’t you?”

“Eek!” I cried, startled as he leaned in close to me, a slight scowl on his face. “Th-The formal uniform looks nice on you,” I finally managed to say.

Our shift had already started, so Captain Ludtink and I began patrolling the ballroom together, although, apparently, this would be the place to least worry about problems arising. Either way, the palace ball was absolutely splendid.

A crystal chandelier hung above our heads, glittering in the light of the candles. The rug underneath us was nice and soft, which my feet were thankful for.

On top of that, my eyes were constantly drawn to the beautiful young ladies as they arrived. Their frilly dresses made them look just like fairy tale princesses! It was like staring at a real-life picture book playing out right before my eyes.

“Hey!” Captain Ludtink said sharply. “Stop spacing out. I can’t help you if you bump into someone important and end up with a target on your back.”

“I know, I know,” I sighed.

The others seemed to be more alert than usual, what with a foreign princess among the guests.

“There’s been some friction between her country and ours,” the captain explained. “So we’re not in a great spot right now.”

“I see...”

By the sound of it, our kingdom wanted to make amends, but the other kingdom wasn’t on the same page as us. Yet their princess was here tonight. I began to understand why everyone was so nervous.

Just then, Captain Ludtink whispered in my ear. “We’re about to guard His Majesty.”

“Huh?!” I said, trying not to be too loud.

“I’m told he’s got a big announcement to give.”

“O-Okay, then...”

Captain Ludtink told me all hands were needed on deck.

This is gonna be a much tougher job than I thought...

Captain Ludtink pressed forward, easily storming his way through the crowd. Meanwhile, I almost got swallowed up in the sea of people.

“Captain Ludtink!!” I cried.

“Knock it off, will ya?!” he barked.

It wasn’t like I could help it! I’m tiny, and there was no way I could push through such a dense crowd. Irritated, the captain grabbed my arm and dragged me behind him.

I trailed along behind him like a wagon until, after a few minutes, we reached the king.

A large group of knights surrounded his Majesty and the royal family. Collectively, they were all so tall I couldn’t exactly see the king.

Captain Ludtink kept pressing forward, still dragging me with him by the arm. Finally, he took a spot in the front of the crowd, with me standing behind him as we waited to hear the king speak.

His Majesty was dressed in a red cape with a golden crown atop his head. With Captain Ludtink in front of me, I could only see a small part of his body. I remembered hearing he was around seventy years old.

“Good evening, everyone,” he said primly as the room instantly fell to a hush. “I have wonderful news to share with you all.”

To summarize the king’s lengthy announcement, we were told our second-born prince was now engaged to tonight’s guest of honor: the foreign princess!

I see... So we’re repairing our relationship with this other kingdom via marriage.

The princess in question was...completely hidden from me. From where I stood, I could only see the bottom of her dress. But when I grabbed Captain Ludtink’s jacket and stood up on my tiptoes, something shocking happened.

Captain Ludtink suddenly sprang into action. I was caught so off-guard, I couldn’t let go of his jacket in time and got dragged along.

But that didn't matter because it looked like all hell was about to break loose. A young woman had approached the foreign princess and was screaming wildly at her.

"You homewrecker!!" She cried as she raised a knife up over her head.

But it never came down as Captain Ludtink near-instantly grabbed her arm and stopped her.

Commotion buzzed all around us as the woman was surrounded by knights and taken into custody. I could hear the knights around me discussing what had just happened.

Apparently, the attacker was the second-born prince's former fiancée. I could hardly believe my ears.

Clearly, this marriage had been arranged as a peace offering, giving the other country our second-born prince to improve relations. I understood how upset this woman must be to lose her fiancé, but it wasn't right to take that out on the foreign princess.

An old man who appeared to be a politician of some kind, probably from the princess' kingdom, suddenly cried out at the king, "How will you make this right?!"

The prince was completely pale in the face as the princess was...finally visible to me for the first time.

"Ah!"

"Aaah!!"

We cried out simultaneously.

"You're the knight from this afternoon!" she exclaimed.

"Ah, yes, I am..." I murmured, still amazed.

Captain Ludtink shot an accusing glance at me, then asked her, "Pardon me, Your Highness, but do you...*know* Medic Risurisu?"

"I do!" she beamed. "I left the palace earlier to get a look at this foreign city, but then I got into some trouble and..."

She left out the part where she ate a whole silver coin's worth of food and didn't pay...

"This knight came to my rescue!"

Her Highness squeezed my hand and offered her gratitude once again. "Thank you so much for helping me!" she said to me, smiling.

"O-Of course," I stuttered, having no idea how to properly respond. "Um, it was nothing."

"There's so much delicious food here!" she raved. "The weather is so nice and mild, and the knights are upstanding and righteous. I *must* tell my father that this is a wonderful kingdom worth learning more about."

"...!"

"Would you do me the honor of attending our wedding too?" she asked me.

"C-Certainly..."

I can't believe it! Her Highness agreed to overlook tonight and invited me to her wedding?! How very generous of her!

The brief turmoil was apparently all but forgotten. After that, I was ordered to stay and entertain Her Highness.

I was certain I'd have nothing to say to such a prestigious member of royalty, but I managed to fish out some amusing anecdotes from my life.

"And Captain Ludtink had the scariest look on his face when he said it!" I exclaimed, finishing a story.

"That must've been frightening!" she said.

Since the princess didn't get out much, she listened intently to all my stories of our unit's expeditions.

"You're so funny, Mel!" she laughed.

"Th-Thank you for saying so," I blushed.

She told me she had enjoyed her stay here, which I was relieved to hear. Tonight's incident could lead to a rift between our two kingdoms. And I was still worried about how things might turn out.

“Don’t worry!” Her Highness said suddenly. “Father loves me, so if I ask him not to interfere, he’ll listen to me.”

...She must’ve seen right through me.

“I truly can’t thank you enough, Your Highness,” I said.

“But I should be thanking you! I went into town without any guards because I wasn’t thinking. I don’t know what might’ve happened without your help. Besides, this trip revealed many weaknesses in my entourage, so it all worked out.”

“Their...weaknesses?”

“Why, yes! My maids didn’t notice that I’d escaped, our cabinet minister has been picking fights with this kingdom, and my knights all failed to protect me... I’ll be sure to use all this as leverage to ask for their silence about tonight’s disturbance.”

She’s pretty tough for a princess...

But I was able to protect her! That was an experience I would treasure for the rest of my life.

After one last bow and curtsy, we parted ways. I didn’t imagine we’d ever cross paths again, but her powerful influence would live on inside me.

The entire day sparked a change inside of me—a change in how I viewed my position as a knight.

We didn’t just fight. It was equally important that we protected others too.

I felt so proud to be a knight.

Chapter 6: A Battle for Caramel in the Ghost Town?!

TODAY, like every other day, I was using my free time to work on preserving food for rations.

Truly, the only enjoyable part of an expedition was the food. I tried to come up with meals that would motivate our members. But I also couldn't just make anything I wanted.

The most important part of ration-making was to choose things that'd keep for a long time. They also had to be easy to transport. Sweets, especially, had to be compact and sturdy.

"What are you working on today, Medic Risurisu?" Ulgus asked. He was acting as my assistant again.

Since he was the only other person in our unit with medic credentials, I simply had no one else to ask.

His question brought me back to the present dish. "I'm going to make some caramel," I replied.

"Oh, that's a great idea!"

"Caramel is high in sugar," I explained. "And sugar, which is a carbohydrate, stimulates the brain."

"I see," Ulgus said. "If our ability to make rational decisions fails us, we could get killed in battle. We need our brains for everything out there."

Of course, I wasn't just making caramel because it was delicious. Nutrition was still my biggest goal.

"It depends on the ingredients," I went on, "but caramel can last up to two months, in fact."

"Wow, that's pretty long," Ulgus said.

"There's just one problem..."

“What’s that?”

“It can’t handle heat. Caramel melts down in summer, so we can only carry it with us in the winter.”

But enough chit-chat! It’s time to get started!

“Let’s start with the ingredients: condensed milk, sugar, corn syrup, and butter. We’ll add them all in equal amounts, with just a little less butter.”

I started by adding the condensed milk, sugar, and corn syrup to a pot and stirred it over a low flame. Once it was nice and soft, I put the butter in and let it simmer until the surface was smooth and glossy.

“Now we’ll let the caramel dry out on a metal sheet,” I said.

I made sure to oil up the sheet so that the caramel wouldn’t stick to it.

If I covered it with a cloth and left it outside in the snow, it’d probably solidify within half a day.

“It sure looks good!” Ulgus exclaimed.

“It probably is, but...”

“But?”

My face was grim as I explained to Ulgus that I didn’t know yet if my batch of caramel had been successful. If something was wrong with it, and we didn’t know until we ate it on a mission, it could put us in a tough spot.

“Wh-What do we do?” Ulgus asked nervously.

“We have to taste it,” I said, taking out some bread I’d gotten from one of the old women working in the cafeteria.

“Bread?”

“Bread,” I repeated.

I scooped some remaining caramel out of the pot and slathered it on a slice of bread.

“Th-That looks delicious...!” Ulgus’s mouth watered.

“We’re testing for defects, Ulgus,” I reminded him.

We split some bread into halves and covered it with caramel before stuffing our cheeks.

“I-It’s so good!” he gushed.

“It really *is*, isn’t it?” I said, a bit impressed with myself.

The caramel was definitely tasty. I hadn’t used any special ingredients, but the end result was still a silky, thick, and fragrant warm caramel. It paired perfectly with our bread, soaking into its dry surface to moisten it.

“This turned out good,” Ulgus said.

“I agree! It’s very well done,” I beamed.

With a new treat as a perk of the job, Ulgus and I spent the rest of our day preserving rations.

Once night fell, I took the hardened caramel off the metal sheet and cut off a bite-sized piece. It had solidified quite nicely, so I also cut a piece off for Ulgus.

All I had to do now was wrap the rest up in wax paper and store the pieces in a jar. After that, I could keep them in the food shed until it was time for a mission.

“I look forward to eating this caramel on an expedition someday, Medic Risurisu!” Ulgus smiled.

“Me too, Ulgus!”

Ulgus’s tone made it sound like his true goal was to just eat caramel on the job, but I decided to ignore that implication.



I opened my eyes at the clock tower’s first chime to discover another beautiful morning outside my window.

But before anything else, I had to battle with my wavy hair. I had combed it out fully before bed last night, but as I tossed and turned in my sleep, I managed to make a tangled mess out of it again.

Back in my village, I always had to wet my hair before taking on the challenge of combing it out. But now, I had a boar-pig hair brush that prevented static and

frizziness, along with lavender, chamomile, and rosemary oils mixed with alcohol I'd bought in town to rub into my hair before combing it. Thanks to these oils, it only took a few minutes to comb my hair out properly.

I braided my hair, put on my uniform, and applied the bare minimum of makeup.

After brushing my teeth, I peered into my bag, checking its contents. I had my wallet, snacks, handkerchief, notebook, writing tools, dorm key, pocketknife, comb, and travel makeup.

This was supposed to be my daily commute bag, but the knife I kept for self-defense alongside everything else made it feel a little unsettling.

I slung my bag over my shoulder and headed to the cafeteria. It was packed with knights grabbing breakfast before work.

Being knights, they were all so big and brawny. I must've looked so tiny by comparison; the old women who worked there were always urging me to eat large servings.

"Good morning, Mell," one of them smiled at me.

"Good morning!"

"It's pancakes for breakfast today," she told me.

"Awesome...!"

I couldn't believe I got to eat something so wonderful this early in the day. I wanted to give her a big hug.

"There are a few different sides to choose from," she went on. "We have butter and maple syrup; whipped cream and berry jam; fried eggs and bacon; or salad and bacon."

"...I can't make up my mind!"

One of the best things about pancakes was how well they went with salty foods. But I couldn't choose between sweet or salty for my breakfast.

"We also have milk soup with root vegetables today," the woman went on.

Ah! That settled it; I ordered pancakes with butter and maple syrup.

“How many pancakes would you like?” she asked.

“Good question...”

I looked around and saw that some knights had stacks of five whole pancakes. They weren’t that thick, but they were still large in size.

I can probably do two...maybe three? I was stuck trying to decide again, so I asked the woman for advice.

“How many do most people get?”

“Usually three. But some people go as high as six or seven and eat every bite.”

“Wow...! Knights are so impressive...” But I knew I could never finish that many.

“I’ll take three.”

“Of course! Feel free to come back for seconds.”

“Right... Thank you so much.”

She handed me a stack of three pancakes slathered in butter and syrup, as well as a bowl of milk and veggie soup. I chose a sweet and sour berry juice to drink.

I spotted a female knight eating a stack of ten pancakes, so I decided to sit across from her. The impressive stack was a true tower of pancakes. She held her fork and knife in her hands, trying to keep a straight look on her face as she battled her breakfast. It was rude to stare, so I said my prayer before eating.

When I opened my eyes, the tower was already halfway eradicated. It was like magic. But the sound of the clock tower’s second bell snapped me out of my daze. I had to eat too. And fast.

The pancakes were thin, but the outsides were crisp and the insides fluffy—the perfect combo of textures. As rich as the maple syrup was in flavor, it didn’t overpower the melted butter.

Once the inside of my mouth was filled with sugar, I took a drink of the soup to replenish my tastebuds with salt. The root vegetables were nice and warm from simmering in the soup.

...But I had no time to sit around, enjoying my meal. I wouldn't be able to meet Zara on time at this rate.

Honestly, I probably could've eaten two more pancakes, at least. But I had to forget it; I was running late and couldn't move fast on a full stomach.

I dropped my dishes off for cleaning, told the women behind the counter that breakfast was delicious, and left the cafeteria.



ZARA was waiting for me in front of the women's dorm. Once again, I was the late one.

"Good morning!"

"Morning, Melly."

Zara was as beautiful as ever that morning, his hair practically glittering in the sunlight. Those golden locks were so smooth and glossy, I imagined he never struggled to comb them like I did.

"What's the matter?" he asked, noticing my stare.

"N-Nothing!"

I would never tell him how much I wished I could steal a bit of his femininity for myself.

"Hey, how come the dorms smell so sweet today?" he asked.

"We had pancakes for breakfast."

"Oh, that explains it, then."

Now that he mentioned it, I also noticed the faint scent of butter in the air.

"I could never have pancakes for breakfast," Zara went on.

"What kinds of things do you eat in the morning, Zara?" I asked.

"Anything that doesn't require a flame. Bread, cheese, ham, and fruit are my go-to foods for breakfast. My home stove uses firewood, so it's a mess to clean."

Zara explained that there were two ways to light a stove. The first was with

firewood. You used a match or another firestarter to light the wood and kept fanning it to stoke the flames.

The second way was by using enchanted stones. It was simple enough; you could easily start a cooking fire by rubbing a stone with a spell carved into it and sticking it onto a stove atop a summoning circle. But these stones were single-use only, so they were quite expensive.

“It doesn’t leave any ash,” he went on, “and there’s no clean-up either, which is nice. It’s just too high of a price tag.”

“I know what you mean.”

Enchanted stone fuel still wasn’t used very often by commoners. With little demand, the price sat firmly in place.

“The older you get,” Zara opined, “the harder it is to adapt to new ways of life.”

“I have to agree...”

“I also heard they’ve been known to explode at times.”

“E-Explode?!” I squeaked.

“Yep. Explode.”

Enchanted stones were a crystallized form of magical energy and, as fuel, were sold with a fire spell carved into their tops. Zara told me that the cheap, low-quality ones would sometimes blow-up people’s stoves.

“But the genuine stones are all fine,” he explained. “It’s just the cheap ones that can cause accidents like that.”

“Still, that’s so scary...”

We kept chatting until we reached the Royal Order HQ. We showed our knight’s bracelets to the guards and were allowed through the gates. From there, we headed to our barracks.

Once we were on the grounds designated for Expeditionary Squadrons, we were surrounded by eye-catchingly muscular male knights. I hardly ever saw slim men like Zara around. And it still shocked me, but Vice Captain Velrey and I

were the only female knights in the Expeditionary Squadrons.

That's why, whenever Zara and I walked around together, we attracted loads of glances. Not that I wasn't used to it by now.

When we arrived in the breakroom, Garr and Ulgus were there.

"Good morning!" I said.

"Morning," said Zara.

"Ah, good morning, you two!" Ulgus said. He was as energetic as ever, typical of the youngest man in the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

"Oh my gosh, Garr! That looks fabulous on you." Zara was the first to spot what was different about Garr today.

"What's fabulous?" Ulgus asked.

"Look, part of his tail fur is braided," Zara pointed out.

"Whoaaaaa, that looks so cool, Garr!" Ulgus exclaimed.

Vaguely impressed that Ulgus hadn't noticed all morning, I took a look at Garr's tail for myself.

Hmm... Yeah, I like these fashion styles that don't jump out at you. Knights had strict dress codes, so we could never really wear anything flashy. With his stud earrings, Zara was already pushing it.

Bracelets were also strictly banned. Necklaces were allowed, so long as they weren't worn visibly, although I felt like that kind of defeated the point.

Magical items like good-luck charms were permitted in all forms with permission. However, expensive enchanted accessories were completely out of reach for the lowest-ranking knights.

I was a little afraid to have holes punched in my ears...OKAY, a *lot* afraid! It was a significant roadblock on my journey to becoming stylish.



WE heard the next bell chiming, signaling we had five minutes before the workday began, so we headed over to the captain's office for our morning meeting.

Vice Captain Velrey was already there. She greeted us chipperly. “Morning, everyone!” she said.

“Good morning,” we all said.

She smiled back at us; it was the so-called “maid-killing smile” I’d heard rumors about.

Though her hair was cut short and she was tall, Vice Captain Velrey still looked feminine. But with all her manly mannerisms, she was said to be extremely popular amongst the maids who worked for the Order.

I understood where they came from. Vice Captain Velrey was a truly wonderful person who understood the female heart and was kind enough to treat me like a friend. She was a knight I deeply respected.

“Your hair looks cute today, Medic Risurisu,” she said, smiling at me.

“Th-Thank you...”

Once again, she praised the hairstyle I’d struggled to perfect today. *I’m so happy!*

But our meeting was about to start, so we stopped the conversation there and lined up to wait for Captain Ludtink. Vice Captain Velrey put her work aside and joined us.

We waited a few minutes in silence until the door swung open with a loud slam.

Captain Ludtink emerged. As always, his face was scary enough to make children cry.

The captain carried a thick stack of documents that he dropped on his desk. Every single one of us knew exactly what they were for. We had gotten new marching orders.

There was really no need for Captain Ludtink’s next words, as they were sure to be something like “We’ve got another expedition.”

Sure enough, he opened his mouth and said, “Look alive! We’re going on an expedition today.”

Ulgus accidentally let out an “Ugh...” which received a swift glare from Captain Ludtink.

“Ulgus!” he snapped. “Do you have any idea what unit you’re a part of?”

“But there’s been so *many* lately!” Ulgus pouted. “It used to be only one or two a month. But it’s picking up really bad now.”

“That’s probably because we’ve been performing better than ever, so the smaller squadrons are being reevaluated.” Captain Ludtink told us the higher-ups were even considering creating another squadron or reorganizing the current ones. “Just deal with it for now. Your paychecks will fatten up with the extra work.”

“...Fine...” Ulgus sniffed.

I understood where he was coming from. Expeditionary squadrons generally only dealt with monsters, so every single mission meant putting your life on the line.

It must be hard to endure such a frightening experience multiple times a month...

Besides, the main job a knight must carry out is to train for worst-case scenarios.

Of course, protecting the people, keeping the peace, and battling monsters also fell under knightly duties. But those all required training to even be achievable at all. That’s why knights spend about half of every year training. Not being able to do that was a real source of anxiety.

Right now, our only option was to listen to Captain Ludtink’s superiors and wait for a new squadron to be formed.

“Now then,” Captain Ludtink went on, “our next mission is in Nagia.”

Nagia was a dry area far from the capital. It’d take nearly a full day to travel there on horseback.

Nagia used to be a great tourist destination due to its abundance of natural hot springs. But about twenty years ago, the springs were discovered to be manmade, leading to a sharp decline in visitors. A ghost town was all that was

left.

“There have been reports of a monster sheltering there,” the captain explained.

The land currently belonged to our kingdom, which planned to redevelop it in a few years, so they needed the monster out of the way.

“The monster’s a Giant Mole,” Captain Ludtink said.

A Giant Mole—a monster that digs holes in the ground and attacks small animals from below.

“It already ate a few men surveying the area,” Captain Ludtink continued. “They had guards, but there was nothing they could do.”

People have already died?! I thought my eyes would fall out of their sockets at the news.

The captain explained that the monster had shot up from underneath the ground and swallowed the men up whole.

No way! That’s terrible! Not a single fiber of my being wanted to go there.

Captain Ludtink continued explaining the job, looking at the documents with a grave look on his face. “Other expeditionary squadrons have made multiple trips to the area, but the monster never once showed itself...”

Just when they thought it was safe, the Giant Mole returned to attack the returning survey party, swallowing up even more men this time. At this point, the Royal Order had to go to the “Monster Research Department.”

“The Monster...Research Department?” I muttered after the captain mentioned it.

I felt like I’d heard Zara mention that name before. They were supposed to be a strange group of folks who tried to obtain the flesh, bones, skin, and any type of monster fragment they could find. And what the Monster Research Department had discovered about this monster was startling.

“Giant Moles are said to be shy,” Captain Ludtink continued, “and the one in Nagia, according to the MRD, apparently only attacked groups based on the number of guards or the squadron composition. If there were more than ten

fighters, it didn't attack."

That makes a lot of sense. This monster is clever...

Once that was known, the reorganized squadron returned to exterminate the monster. But their mission was a failure. No lives were lost. But there were many injuries due to their lack of training.

Forming a makeshift unit for this mission alone might lead to problems in team compatibility.

"So now it's our turn to take over," Captain Ludtink finished.

The mood in the room grew somber. This felt like too great of a task for us. Sure, we'd be awarded and compensated if we succeeded. But those bonuses paled in comparison to the value of our own lives.

But we were knights. If these were our orders, we had to follow them.

"That's all. Be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, sir," we said before going our separate ways.

I kept a few days' worth of clothes in the changing room, which I grabbed and stuffed in a bag. Next, I raced to the food shed to prepare the rations. Captain Ludtink had ordered me to bring enough rations for three days.

One by one, I packed bread, cheese, smoked meat, spices, and jarred food. Three days of food added up to quite a lot of weight. Ulgus would carry half of it, but I also had my pot to haul around on top of it all.

As I worked on making bags of snacks like biscuits and chocolates that we could carry around, Ulgus joined me in the shed.

"Let me help you, Medic Risurisu."

"Thank you."

We both crammed food into leather pouches.

"We sure are unlucky, huh?" he said.

"Well, orders are orders."

This was all part of the job. I didn't know how else to respond to him.

“I’ll put some extra caramel in your bag, Ulgus.”

“Ah! I forgot about the caramel!”

I placed three pieces of caramel in a bag and hung it on his belt. Ulgus looked so happy.

“Thank you, Medic Risurisu! I’ll do my best.”

Ulgus’s motivation was completely restored by the caramel. I could hear it in his voice.

“Ah! I think it’s time to get going.”

“We should hurry.”

With our bags strapped to our backs, we headed to our meetup spot.



WE traveled to our destination by carriage, stopping for a break every three hours. Captain Ludtink, Garr, and Vice Captain Velrey took turns driving the carriage. The captain was first up.

The rest of us were free to do as we pleased during the journey.

Vice Captain Velrey crossed her arms and focused her gaze outside the window.

Garr polished his knives. Ulgus napped. Zara practiced his embroidery.

I brought along a textbook, making up for the studying I’d been too busy to do over the past few days.

We stopped in a small village for lunch at a restaurant. After that, Vice Captain Velrey took the carriage reins.

The mood in the carriage was strangely awkward with Captain Ludtink. Or maybe I was the only one who sensed it.

“...My shoulders sure are stiff,” he muttered to himself.

“Would you like me to apply a poultice?” I asked.

“You mean that stuff you put on my foot?”

“Exactly.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“Roger.”

I'd made the last poultice with wound-healing herbs, but this time, I'd have to choose herbs that relieved stiffness.

“Can you tell me exactly what kind of symptoms you have?” I asked.

“My shoulders are heavy,” the captain said simply. “There's a dull ache.”

“Does it feel hot at all?”

“...I guess so, now that ya mention it.”

“And it just started hurting all of a sudden?”

“Yeah. That's right.”

“I see. I understand.”

I asked Vice Captain Velrey to stop the carriage a moment. After stepping out to put some snow in a pouch, I went back inside.

“What's the snow for?” Captain Ludtink asked.

“To make a cold compress,” I said simply.

Cold compresses were the most effective way to relieve sudden stiffness. But since this was merely a stopgap for pain, it was best to see a doctor if it kept aching.

I poured some water into a bucket, added the snow, and mixed it all together. Then I added a few drops of oils made from herbs that relieved pain and promoted good circulation. After mixing these up thoroughly, I dunked a handkerchief in the water and wrung it out.

“Okay, Captain. Please take your jacket off now.”

“Fine.”

Captain Ludtink removed his jacket and turned his back toward me.

“Your body's always so impressive, Captain Ludtink!” Ulgus couldn't stop himself from remarking.

“Quit staring, kid!”

“But you’re the one who put your muscles in my face out of nowhere!”

Ulgus was right—Captain Ludtink *did* have an impressive body. His back was extremely muscular from swinging his longsword around.

Not that this was the time to get distracted by his physique. I needed to get to work.

“All right. I’m going to apply the compress now.”

“Go ahead.”

I wrapped the handkerchief over his shoulder.

“Gah! It’s freezing!”

“I know. Just hang on a bit.”

I left it on him for a few minutes.

“That should do it,” I said, removing it. “How does that feel?”

“A lot better than before, actually.”

“Great!”

I was glad I’d gotten a chance to use my medic skills. Lately, it seemed all I’d been doing was cooking.

After that, Captain Ludtink fell asleep as the carriage continued to rattle its way down the road.

We eventually stopped at another small village to rest for the night. Nagia was still another three hours away.

Even though all I’d done was sit all day, I was strangely exhausted and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.



THE next day, it was finally time to carry out our mission.

I slept well, ate a nice breakfast, and was feeling full of energy again! ...Except the job ahead of us was so terrible, I slumped right back into dread. But all I could do was pat my cheeks and get myself fired up.

We had a carriage driver from the village take us the rest of the way to Nagia.

Since horses were prone to monster attacks, he was planning on leaving us there and returning to get us once night came.

The thought of being left all alone in a monster-infested land was horrifying. But I had no choice but to grin and bear it.

We sat in the carriage, no one speaking, for three whole hours. Then finally, we reached our destination.

The town itself was quite large, as expected of such a once-popular tourist destination.

Its streets were lined with one brick building after another. I spotted souvenir shops, restaurants, hotels, and hot springs...but all the windows were cracked, the doors were missing, and the wallpaper was peeling off.

Against all the bright surroundings, the sheer ruin of it all was disturbing.

A thin layer of snow sat on the ground. *This is even less than what we get in the capital.*

Giant Moles, I remembered, were said to cause the ground to rumble before they pierced the surface.

“Medic Risurisu, if the Giant Mole appears, you have to run away,” Captain Ludtink intoned. “You’ve got good ears, right?”

“Right! I’ll do my best.”

But I’m kind of slow. I feel like I’ll get eaten up first...

The cobblestone paving throughout the town was covered in grass—a clear sign of what an abandoned city looked like. Every inch of this place was disturbing to see.

We pushed on, remaining vigilant the entire time.

Captain Ludtink was moving slowly, so I used the opportunity to pick herbs as I followed him.

Eventually, he got mad and ordered me not to get distracted and to leave the herbs alone. *Grrr...*

It was just about time for our first break.

Once we reached the town square, we sat down in chairs left around a fountain.

Just then, I caught a glimpse of a bright-colored bird flying by. Ulgus was sitting next to me, so I grabbed his sleeve.

“Ulgus, I just saw a bird!”

“Really? Where?”

“Right over there!”

I spotted some green feathers, just barely visible amongst the grass, so I asked Ulgus to grab his bow right away.

“But I can’t see any green feathers in all this grass... Ah!”

He spotted it too. Lifting his bow, he didn’t waste a moment before letting an arrow fly.

He struck with perfect accuracy!

“This is a really colorful bird, huh?” he said after picking it up from where it fell and bringing it back to us.

The bird’s head was green, its neck was red, its shoulders were purple, and its tail feathers were yellow.

“That’s a monal pheasant, isn’t it?” Captain Ludtink seemed to recognize it. He explained, a grim look on his face, that women used their feathers to make folding fans and caps.

As to why he looked so pained...

“Years ago, Marina...my fiancée asked me to hunt some of these birds for her,” he said. “But the birds were far too rare for me to find any. She was really pissed when I came back empty-handed. I figured she could just buy one at a store...”

I knew she had probably wanted to make a fan or cap from monal feathers hunted by the man she loved. Many delicate young maidens wanted the same.

“But monal meat is really good,” Captain Ludtink went on.

“Oh!” I started to get excited, and I took the bird from Ulgus.

My first step was to pluck the feathers and drain its blood. I then removed the organs, filled a pouch with snow, and stored the bird inside it.

Our break ended there, and we resumed our hunt.

The town was eerily silent. It was hard to believe there was a monster lurking beneath our feet. But there was no mistaking it.

We took step after vigilant step, pressing forward cautiously.

“Garr, do you hear or smell anything?” Captain Ludtink asked.

Garr furrowed his brow and looked around, his nose twitching with each turn.

Just when I thought we must be safe, his ears suddenly perked up.

“Ah!” I gasped. My ears detected the sudden change too. “It’s coming!!”

“All hands,” Captain Ludtink bellowed, “prepare for battle! Ulgus, Medic Risurisu, fall back!”

“Yessir!”

“R-Roger!”

I dropped everything I was carrying and broke into a sprint.

The ground started to rumble with tiny pebbles shaking loose from the dirt. The sound of falling stones and roots being ripped to shreds echoed through the town as the ground bulged, revealing the creature moving just beneath the surface.

“It’s finally here,” I murmured.

“You’re right,” Ulgus said grimly.

A ferocious monster that has eaten people. Just thinking about it made me shudder.

Ulgus had already drawn a poisoned arrow. He was staring ahead, waiting for the right moment to fire.

The ground swelled as something pushed up from below. It was moving faster than a human could run, sending ripples in all directions like it was swimming through water.

Captain Ludtink stood in front, flanked by Zara, then Garr, with Vice Captain Velrey bringing up the rear.

Finally, the Giant Mole emerged from the ground in an explosion of dirt, rocks, and roots.

The beast was covered in brown fur, its body short and stout. I saw its nose was pointy. But I realized that since I couldn't spot its ears, they must've deteriorated over time. The mole had three eyes on each side of its head; all six glowed red in the creepiest way.

But the most shocking part was its razor-sharp claws. I knew it must've used those to dig its way through the dirt with total ease.

No one could survive a strike from those...

Captain Ludtink drew his sword, raised it high, and then...the Giant Mole buried itself back in the ground.

"Can you make it to the roof of that building, Medic Risurisu?" Ulgus asked, clearly thinking it was too dangerous to stay where we were.

"I-I'll try my best."

I used a wooden crate nearby as a stool to climb up on a windowsill. But then...

"Whoa!"

The old crate gave way under my foot. I lost my balance and tumbled backward.

"Watch out!" Ulgus shouted.

Just before I could hit the ground, I ended up landing on top of Ulgus instead.

"Oof!" he groaned as I knocked the wind out of him.

"Ah! I'm so sorry!"

"I-It's fine..." he said, still catching his breath.

"Th-Thank you for breaking my fall."

The Giant Mole then reared its head again. I leaped up in a panic.

The monster was now right behind Vice Captain Velrey and Garr...right where I'd dropped my bag!

"Geh!" I shouted.

"Whoa!" Ulgus cried, startled by my shouting.

To my shock, the Great Mole started tearing into my food pouch, looking for what was inside.

"Wh-What's it doing...?" Ulgus asked.

"Ah...I think it swallowed one of my jars," I said.

"You've got good eyes, don't you, Medic Risurisu?"

"As good as any other Fore Elf," I replied. "I couldn't see which jar it actually ate, though."

It dug through my pouch for almost a full minute.

Captain Ludtink used that time to race toward it, but once again, the Giant Mole sank back down into the earth.

"Holy crap!" Ulgus exclaimed.

"Eek!" I cried.

This time, it was headed straight toward us.

"Risurisu! Ulgus! Get out of there!!" Captain Ludtink shouted at us.

"Yeah, we get it!" Ulgus said.

"We're trying!" I shouted back.

We took off as fast as our legs could carry us.

Never in my life had I experienced something like this: being chased by a monster. My heart was pounding in my chest like a drum.

All I could do was scream to get rid of the overwhelming fear inside of me.

"H-How did it come to thiiis?!"

"Don't talk when you run, Medic Risurisu, or you'll bite yow tongue!!" Clearly, Ulgus already had; I could see the pain in his eyes.

The rumbling ground reminded us of our pursuer. I shook off my distractions and focused on running forward with all my might.

But still, I couldn't believe how fast it was! In no time at all, the Giant Mole was getting closer.



“Let’s split up, Medic Risurisu!” Ulgus suggested.

“But—”

“It’s all right. If that thing gets close to you, I’ll shoot it with a poison arrow.”

“All right!”

Just ahead of us was a road that forked.

My heart raced. Sweat dripped from my brow onto the ground as I ran.

I veered off to the left while Ulgus went right.

The Giant Mole came crashing out of the ground as soon as we split up. I caught the briefest glance of its brown fur out of the corner of my eye. Its eyes gleamed a terrifying red.

I finally made it to a turn in the road.

Please be okay, Ulgus!

Praying the monster wouldn’t come my way, I kicked off the ground and made a sharp turn to the left.

My heart was in my throat, pounding violently. But I couldn’t let it slow me down.

But then...

“Aaaaaw! Damn it!” I heard Ulgus cry out.

The Giant Mole must’ve gone the other way. Uh...you have my sympathies...

Worried about him, I managed to climb up to a roof and see how he was doing.

“Are you okay, Medic Risurisu?”

“Vice Captain! I’m all right!”

“Good! Don’t leave that roof until it’s over.”

“Understood.”

The rest of the squad was chasing the great beast from behind. But they still were a long ways off from Ulgus and the monster.

You can do it, Ulgus! Defeat isn't an option!

But the Giant Mole wasn't about to stop its rampage.

I couldn't watch anymore. Just as I was about to look away, I watched Ulgus do something amazing. He raced toward a building, jumped up from a crate, kicked the wall for more momentum, and landed on the roof.

Once he was there, he held up his bow and sent an arrow flying. It struck the Giant Mole right between the eyes.

The beast cried out in pain before burying itself back in the ground. It fled with startling speed.

Ulgus had readied his second arrow, but Captain Ludtink ordered him to wait. Everyone was out of position, so it wouldn't be safe to chase the monster away.

But what mattered most was Ulgus's safety. He didn't appear injured, and I sighed in relief.

I slumped down to the ground, unable to move. Zara came to retrieve me.

"Are you okay, Melly?" he asked.

"Y-Yes, I made it out all right."

But I just couldn't make myself stand. As pathetic as it was, I was probably stuck here for a while.

"Don't worry. I'll save you."

"Huh?!"

Zara swiftly climbed up to the roof to join me.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No."

I was wondering just how, exactly, he was planning to "save" me...only to have Zara scoop me under his arm and jump back down to the ground below.

He did it so fast, I had no time to react.

"Can you walk, Melly?" he asked.

"Ah, um...I th-think so..."

Zara set me down right away, but sadly, I sank to the ground again, my legs going limp as jelly.

“Oh no, Melly!”

“Ngh! I’m sorry...”

This time, Zara picked me up and carried me on his back like a child. I felt so guilty for making him do that for me.

We met up with the others, then surrounded my torn-up food bag to see what the damage was.

“What exactly did that thing eat?” Captain Ludtink asked.

I organized the bag’s contents to see what was missing.

Bread, cheese, smoked meats, dried fruits, roasted beans, biscuits... everything seemed to be intact.

So, what did it actually eat?

“Ah!” Ulgus cried. “You said you saw it swallow a jar whole, right, Medic Risurisu?”

“That’s right.”

My jarred goods included boar-pig liver, sugar-simmered fruits, honey... *Wait...*

“Ah, Medic Risurisu!” Ulgus said. “The caramel’s gone!”

“That’s it!” I said.

Could the Giant Mole have intentionally gone after my caramel?

“I’m the only one in the squad who had any caramel on my person,” Ulgus pointed out. “Maybe that’s why the thing chased me.”

Right. He’d had some in his personal bag too...

“I see. So that means we can lure the bastard out with caramel?” Captain Ludtink smirked, much like a bandit who’d come up with an evil plot. “But the problem is,” he mused, “how to actually defeat it.”

Ulgus had hit it with a poison arrow, but the Giant Mole still managed to flee

with basically no damage.

“Actually,” Ulgus said suddenly. “It felt like my arrow didn’t penetrate very deep.”

“It’s probably got thick skin,” Captain Ludtink concluded.

The captain went on to speculate that the Giant Mole only fled because the counterattack startled it. “It runs away fast,” he pointed out. “Probably knows how to defend itself well and doesn’t have any weak spots we know of yet...”

Right now, there was nothing we could do.

“Anyway,” Captain Ludtink said, “just gimme your caramel so I can lay a trap.”

Ulgus clutched his bag of caramel close to his chest.

“Ulgus! Your caramel!”

“...Yes, sir.” Ulgus sadly retrieved the three cubes from inside his bag and handed them over.

He had really been looking forward to eating it out in the field. *First, he got attacked by a Giant Mole, and now he can’t even eat the caramel I made!* I felt so terrible for him.

“I’ll make you lots more when we get home, Ulgus,” I promised.

“Thank you, Medic Risurisu...”

Captain Ludtink ordered we take a lunch break now. But we were all too nervous to eat.

“There’s a hill on the other side of town,” he said. “The Giant Mole probably can’t reach us there.”

We walked up the town’s rising streets till we reached a staircase. Once we climbed up, we arrived at a lookout point where we could see the entire town below.

While we waited, Vice Captain Velrey took Zara to patrol the area.

Ulgus worked on making arrowheads out of broken rocks. Garr stood at the edge of the lookout point to watch over the town. Captain Ludtink recorded the details of our first battle in his journal.

My duty, of course, was to cook.

Luckily enough, we had access to spring water here. *They must've dug it out for tourists to access.*

The water was very clear, and it didn't give a negative reaction when I used my enchanted water quality tester. But just to be safe, I had Captain Ludtink drink some.

"...Seems fine to me," he grunted. "It's pretty good."

With his seal of approval, I decided to use it for our lunch.

I started by using some of the cobblestone paving the Giant Mole had dislodged earlier to stack up for a stove. The scattered wooden crates nearby would work as firewood.

Our main dish would be the monal pheasant Ulgus hunted earlier. It wasn't that big of a bird, but its body was lean, and it looked delicious. I had already plucked its feathers earlier, which I hoped to use for some kind of craft in the future.

I started to take the body apart. I was eventually left with wings, bones, breasts, tenderloins, and thighs.

Then I secretly borrowed some of Captain Ludtink's booze to pour into the water, boiling off the alcohol.

Next, I added the bones and removed the foam that formed in the pot. I sliced up the herbs I'd found earlier, which I put in the pot as an odor-remover. Removing more foam until the soup was nice and clear, I scooped the bones out and set them aside.

The next step was to add dried mushrooms, oil-marinated vegetables, and the bird's wings.

Once these all came to a boil, I added bite-sized pieces of the thighs and tenderloins.

The soup bubbled. I scooped out any impurities that rose to the surface.

Finally, after a bit of salt and pepper as a finishing touch, my "Monal Pheasant Soup" was complete.

But I still had drinks to prepare too.

I poured water into another pot and added the dried bark, seeds, and roots that I collected on our last expedition, letting them boil together.

This was called infused tea—the act of boiling everything together in a pot to make tea. The steam contained many healthy, active ingredients, so I left the lid over the pot to keep it in.

I extinguished the fire and let it sit for a few minutes.

When I opened the lid up, the water was a greenish-brown color, meaning the tea was ready. It looked really bitter. *But this is the price of good health.* A big spoonful of honey was sure to make it taste better.

Perfect! It's all ready!

Vice Captain Velrey and Zara returned from patrol just in time. I told everyone that lunch was served.

“This is monal soup and infused tea,” I told them.

They could take some bread and biscuits if they wanted any. I poured the soup into bowls and passed them out. For Ulgus, who'd performed so well in the battle against the mole, I added extra pieces of soft thigh meat to his bowl.

I prayed to the gods. Then it was time to dig in.

First, a sip of infused tea.

“...Urgh!” I groaned.

The sheer bitterness of the tea stole my breath away. Everyone turned to look at me.

“I-It's so good!” I stuttered quickly.

“Liar,” scoffed Captain Ludtink.

You got me there. I couldn't deny it, so I simply smiled awkwardly, hoping he would get the message.

To cleanse my palate, I tried the soup next. “Oh! It's great!!”

I could really taste the quality of Captain Ludtink's expensive booze. The meat

didn't smell bad at all, and the wild monal's natural flavors shone through.

I realized, feeling how chewy the bird was, that I must not have cooked it long enough. Not that it wasn't still delicious. The meat had a light flavor which did well in a soup. I chewed it harder and picked up hints of sweetness too. With no unpleasant aftertaste and plenty of fat to add to the flavor, I had no complaints at all.

The seasoning was a bit rich, but I could feel the soup coursing through my tired body. It was delicious. And as monal pheasant meat contained lots of nutrients, I imagined it'd give us a good boost of energy.

For the leftover soup, I added some noodles I'd already boiled.

"Wow, Medic Risurisu! This is so good!" Ulgus cried as he slurped both of them up.

"I'm glad to hear it." I beamed.

The noodles soaked up the soup broth, which was already concentrated with tasty flavors, and felt like it could be a meal all on its own. I was just glad Ulgus liked the addition.

I finished my lunch with a smile, proud of the delicious meal I had whipped up.

After the soup, the rest of the squad drank their infused tea with pained looks on their faces. But it'd give them much-needed nutrients, so I made sure they finished their entire cups.

With lunch finished, we sat around and planned out how to defeat the Giant Mole.

"Velrey," the captain said. "Did you see anything noteworthy on your patrol?"

"The ground was very loose, probably from what the Giant Mole did to it. It's not unthinkable the ground might collapse." She explained that the dirt had sunk in just from her applying a little pressure with her foot.

"That certainly sounds dangerous!" I said.

"Whoa... So we might fall through the ground when we're trying to run away...?" Ulgus asked.

“You’re lucky you managed to escape the first time, Ulgus,” Captain Ludtink said.

“I’ve got goosebumps just thinking about it!” Ulgus rubbed his arms.

“Because of that, we can’t face it head-on,” Vice Captain Velrey concluded.

“So our only chance is to set a trap and take it out in one blow...” I murmured.

Captain Ludtink nodded at my suggestion.

Garr, who had observed the town from above, said that there was only one road the Giant Mole traveled down. It was repeatedly circling a certain row of shops, keeping the town square in the very center.

“We’ve got caramel to lure it in now.” Vice Captain Velrey’s expression was serious as she spoke.

It seemed *my* caramel would be the key to taking this monster down.

“I don’t think it’ll attack us while it’s patrolling,” Zara asserted. “The beast seems pretty cautious.”

Captain Ludtink nodded in agreement at that. Then he spoke up. “*If* we fight it, we should do it in the town square, where the terrain’s open. We might be able to lure it there, but the problem is what we do next.”

“About that...” Zara raised his hand. He told us they had discovered a large number of enchanted stones while on patrol.

“That makes sense,” Captain Ludtink said. “They must’ve kept a huge stockpile of enchanted stones here to fuel the hot springs...”

Clearly, the men who’d made the hot springs had left all the stones behind once their trick was discovered.

I cocked my head, wondering what the connection between our mission and the enchanted stones was...when suddenly, I remembered what Zara had told me about enchanted stones the other day.

“Zara, d-don’t tell me!” I cried.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Those stones are the cheap kind, and they’ll blow if we ignite them.”

“Is that right?” Captain Ludtink seemed to understand where Zara was going with this. He broke into a wicked smirk.

Vice Captain Velrey and Garr got the message too. Only one of us remained in the dark.

“Wait, what do you mean?” Ulgus asked.

“Ulgus...” Captain Ludtink said, turning to him. “This mission depends on you.”

“What?! You’re kidding! I can’t take all that responsibility!”

But Ulgus was the only one who could do it.

“What exactly are you about to make me do?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

“With your aim,” the captain said, still smirking, “I’m sure it won’t be that hard.”

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this...” Ulgus groaned.

Captain Ludtink was right. The plan itself was simple.

First, we’d leave the rest of the caramel out in the town square. This would lure the Giant Mole out. And as soon as the monster reached the square, Ulgus would shoot a flaming arrow at the stones.

“So,” the captain finished, “if you manage to hit it just right, there’ll be a huge explosion. Not even a Giant Mole could survive that.”

“I *knew* I was going to hate this plan...” Ulgus whined.

Everything depended on Ulgus’s aim.

“All right, let’s get to it,” Captain Ludtink said firmly. “We’re finishing this today.”

“*Ngh...* But what...if I fail...?” Ulgus said hesitantly.

I was certain he’d succeed; I had never once seen him miss a shot. He was a master of his craft. That’s why seeing his lack of self-confidence was so perplexing to me.

Maybe that’s just who he is as a person...

Captain Ludtink gave the slumped Ulgus a slap on the back to cheer him up.

“Ouch!” Ulgus cried. “That hurt!”

“Nah, you’re just bein’ sensitive.”

“Of *course* I’m sensitive! This is a *huge* responsibility!”

“Relax. If you mess up, I can still slaughter the Giant Mole myself.”

“Whoa...”

“Whoa...”

“What’s with you two?”

Ulgus and I both shuddered to hear a word as powerful as “slaughter” come from the captain’s mouth.

“That’s enough talk,” he sniffed as he stood up. “Let’s get to work.”

At that command, we all responded, “Roger.”

At long last, the final battle was about to begin.



THE town square was completely void of any signs of the monster.

Captain Ludtink and Garr set up the enchanted stones and caramel in the plaza.

Once the trap was set, we waited in a spot slightly further away, ready to charge in and finish off the mole after the explosion.

Ulgus was on a roof just far enough away to land his arrows. Vice Captain Velrey would give the order to fire. Zara and I sat on our own roof, even farther from the town square, although it meant we were able to see everyone else.

“Are you holding up all right, Melly?” he asked me suddenly.

“...Um, yeah.”

But that wasn’t true. Inside, I was scared to death.

The idea of blowing up a monster with enchanted stones was terrifying. I didn’t know how big the explosion would be in the first place or if the other

squad members standing by on the ground would get hurt.

Noticing I was trembling, Zara wrapped me up in his coat and whispered in my ear, "It's gonna work out."

Strangely, his words were enough to stop me from shaking.

I kept my eyes focused straight ahead, refusing to take them off what was about to unfold.

One hour later, the ground let out a loud rumble.

"...It's here," I said, my ears picking up on it first.

"Yes, it is," Zara nodded.

The Giant Mole was advancing.

So the thing really *did* love caramel. It was actually following the smell!

Once it reached the town square, the mole emerged from the ground. It was heading straight for the trap.

Step by step, it crept its way toward the caramel and enchanted stones.

Finally, it was there. My heart started to pound in my chest.

And then...

"Fire!!" Vice Captain Velrey's command came clear and resolute.

Ulgus sent a flaming arrow flying toward the square.

I covered my ears and squeezed my eyes shut.

When the arrow flew straight on and struck the enchanted stones, I heard a gigantic BOOM!

The ground shook violently. The house we were camped out on top of trembled and swayed.

When the gust of wind struck me, I almost fell over.

"Eep!" I cried.

"It's okay now, Melly," Zara said softly.

"R-Right..." I said as I straightened and looked toward the square.

The entire town square had been blackened. I realized just how big the explosion must've been. We could still see the pillars of flames surrounding a large black lump—*that's definitely the Giant Mole!*

I started to smell a large amount of smoke and some sort of burning meat.

My throat stung and I coughed. Zara reached over and covered my mouth with his cloak.

The Giant Mole ended up dying from the flames before Captain Ludtink and Garr could step in to finish it off.

Only a few bones remained while the rest of its flesh was burned away. We'd be taking those bones home with us.

Ulgus was sitting on the ground in what looked like a total daze.

"You did great, Ulgus," I said as I ran up to him.

"Thanks..."

"Are you... No, you're not okay, are you?"

"I'll manage."

He showed me his still-trembling hands. I was so proud of his perseverance. I reached out, patted his head...and suddenly realized I was acting like my squadmate was my little brother!

"I'm sorry!" I said in embarrassment, backing away. "I didn't mean to do that."

"It's fine! I-I like it."

At that, Zara piped up. "Really? You do? Well then...there, there."

Zara reached out to pat his head too, making Ulgus stiffen up.

Wonder what he's thinking? I thought as I watched them. *Something like "I like having my head patted by someone so beautiful...but did it really have to be a guy?"*

"Actually..." Ulgus muttered. "I'd *prefer* to be comforted by a lady..."

"Why don't you ask Velrey?" Zara teased.

“No way! I can’t ask a commanding officer to pat my head!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the look of desperation on Ulgus’s face. It was a relief to see him with some energy again.

When evening came, the carriage arrived to pick us up again. It was another three-hour trip back to the village we’d left from.

We stayed there one more night, then returned home.



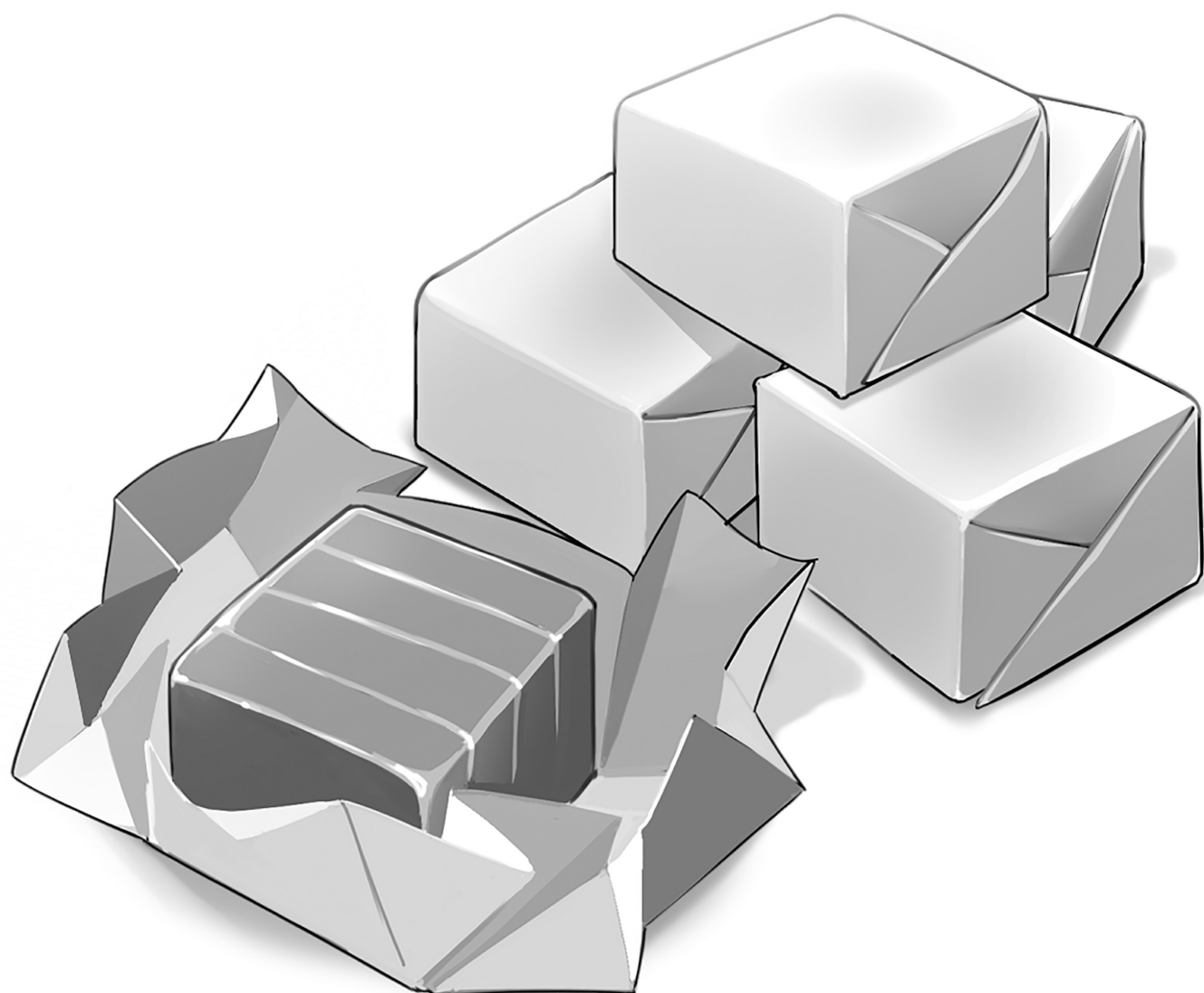
THE mission wrapped up cleanly...however, we later learned that the Giant Mole had disturbed the ground enough to the point Nagia’s redevelopment had to be postponed.

But that wasn’t the only discovery. Amazingly, the survey crew sent to follow up after us was able to find enchanted coal to mine from the boulders the mole had tossed up to the surface. That would serve as fuel for another project instead.

We were shocked; none of us had expected that at all!

After our return, Captain Ludtink was once again awarded for his success in exterminating the Giant Mole. I was so happy to see him honored for it.

Thus, our mission ended in the most auspicious of ways.



Chapter 7: Surprise Hamburg Steak During Hunting Season

ONCE winter was upon us, it officially became legal to hunt in the forests near the royal capital.

Noblemen loved the hunting season. However, only the richest could afford to participate. Between the cost of equipment, fees required to join the hunting society, and the hours needed to hunt for game, it was an expensive, time-consuming hobby.

As for just what a hunting society *was*, apparently it existed for members—mostly men—to compare and brag about the size of their respective kills. Not that it made much sense to me.

With hunting season now open, our squad received a surprising mission.

“There’s a gigantic wild three-horned cow in the woods near the city,” Captain Ludtink said at our morning meeting. “We have to take it out before it hurts someone.”

Three-horned cows were perfectly normal livestock. As the name implies, they were cows with three horns growing from their heads. Apparently, one had escaped a farm and had grown large enough to dominate everything else in the woods.

“So we’re headin’ to the forest for this one,” the captain said.

We mounted our horses and rode out.



THE forest ground was covered in a thin layer of snow. We felt a chill whenever the wind blew past us.

Our group cautiously navigated the forest on our horses. Captain Ludtink took the lead, followed by Garr, Zara, and me in the middle. Ulgus and Vice Captain Velrey brought up the rear.

“Ah, Captain Ludtink! That’s three-horned cow dung!” I called out to the captain, my eyes catching sight of it first.

Normal cow dung was about two fingers in width, but the lump on the ground was the size of a toddler.

“Looks like we’re dealing with a real giant,” he said.

“Let’s be careful from here out.”

Captain Ludtink and Vice Captain Velrey spoke as they stared down at the impressive pile.

I remembered hearing that three-horned cow dung could be dried out and used as lighter fuel, so I made an...odd request.

“Um...may I take this with me?”

“Huh?!” Captain Ludtink wrinkled his brow, looking at me as if to say, “Are you daff?”

“What the hell do you need dung for?” he asked.

“For the fire! It’s supposed to burn very well.”

“I don’t wanna eat any food that’s been cooked over dung,” he said firmly.

“But three-horned cows are herbivores,” I explained. “So there won’t be much odor. It will just smell a bit like grass.”

“I don’t believe you! If that was true, then barns wouldn’t stink at all.”

“I... I guess. But—”

Now Vice Captain Velrey stepped in. “It’s possible,” she said calmly, “that this cow ate all kinds of things to grow as large as it did. Like monsters, for example.”

I gasped when I heard that. She was right.

This three-horned cow wasn’t like the ones people raised on farms. I remembered all the missing persons cases from last month. *If it’d eaten not just monsters, but people too...* I shuddered to even think of it.

“Never mind,” I said quickly. “I’ll leave it here.”

“Good idea,” the vice captain said.

I buried the dung and prayed for those who lost their lives. Vice Captain Velrey gave me a pat on the back.

After traveling some more, my squadmates dismounted their horses and started to walk once there was no more path to follow. I was left in charge of the horses.

I quickly surrounded the area with holy water to prevent any monsters from approaching.

As much as I was craving a warm drink, I couldn't light a fire so close to the horses.

My lunch consisted of bread, cheese, and smoked meat. Captain Ludtink had told me to eat once afternoon came around. But it didn't feel right, eating completely alone.

I ate my food, my mind not particularly alert, when suddenly, I heard rumbling off in the distance.

“...Hmm?”

A distinct thumping sound reached my ears. I felt the ground trembling beneath me. *Don't tell me it's...*

“GYUROOOOOH!”

“Hey!! Get back here, damn it!!”

It was a monster's cry, followed by a threat from Captain Ludtink. They sounded like they were coming my way.

I started to panic. I didn't know what to do.

My holy water should keep me safe, but a three-horned cow's, well, a cow, not a monster! It won't be affected! I cradled my head in my hands at that realization.

We had six horses with us; that was way more than I could lead to safety. Guiltily, I ran to a nearby tree and climbed up its thick trunk to get out of the way. I perched on the fattest branch toward the top.

The horses weren't tied up, so when they sensed the approaching danger, they all scattered in different directions. They were trained to return at the sound of a whistle, so I was pretty sure we could retrieve them later. *At least, I hope so...*

Then I saw it—the gigantic three-horned cow.

Its protruding horns were sharp and its body was huge. It had to be more than three times the size of a normal cow. But there was no doubt it was fleeing from Captain Ludtink.

I knew I had to stop this gigantic beast. I reached into my pouch, felt around, and pulled out some chili powder.

Now the animal was right underneath me. I aimed for its eyes and sent the powder raining down from above. Then I threw down the entire bag and managed to strike the cow right in the face.

“GYUROOOOOH!”

The cow let out a wail. Miraculously, I'd succeeded in getting chili powder in its eyes. I'd managed to stop its rampage, but I was unprepared for what happened next.

“GYUROOOOOOH!!”

The cow writhed around from the stinging pain and then it began wildly ramming its head into my tree.

“EEEEEEK!!”

My tree swayed from side to side. I grabbed hold of the trunk with all the strength in my body.

Captain Ludtink! Everyone! Please get here fast!!

Again and again, the three-horned cow rammed into the trunk, desperate to escape the pain. *C'mon, I know how much it hurts, but can't you pick a different tree?!*

“H-Hey! Whoa!” I cried. “Stop iiiiiiit!!”

The more the cow rammed my tree, the more it shook, threatening to send

me flying. It was terrifying! *Why did I even try and stop it in the first place?!*

If I fell now, I'd definitely get gored by its sharp horns. Getting skewered was the absolute *last* way I wanted to die.

"Aaah!!!" I cried. "I-I can't hold on!!"

Just as my arms were about to give out...a miracle happened.

"There you are, ya damn cow!"

Pure relief flooded my body the second I heard Captain Ludtink's boorish shout. He'd made it before I fell!

The three-horned cow turned, seeming to sense it was in danger. But the chili powder kept stinging its eyes, causing it to stagger.

That was just enough time for Captain Ludtink to swing his longsword down. He struck it in the neck and cut its head off in one clean motion.

The decapitated cow slumped forward, putting all its weight directly on my tree trunk!

"EEEEK!!"

This time, I couldn't hold on. I felt my body sailing through the air...

"Melly!"

Before I could collide with the cow's corpse below, Zara raced forward and caught me.

"Are you all right?!" he asked breathlessly.

"I-I think so..."

That was so close! That was a big fall! I might've been seriously hurt if I had hit the ground.

"Th-Thank you, Zara."

"Don't mention it," he said, smiling.

"O-Okay..."

As soon as my brain processed that I was safe, my whole body started to tremble. Of course, Captain Ludtink still had to scold me...

"I *told* you to stay out of our battles!!" he snarled.

"I-I'm really sorry!!" I wound up crying this time around. Not from the captain's scary face as I once might have, but because it finally hit me just how much danger I'd been in.

"Just never do that again!" Captain Ludtink barked.

"I won't...I promise..."

Vice Captain Velrey silently pulled me into a hug. Ulgus silently handed me a piece of candy.

Garr positioned himself in between Captain Ludtink and me. Zara gave the captain a sharp glare.

"Wh-What's with you guys...?!" the captain asked.

"Nothing," Zara said firmly. "I just think you're getting too mad at her."

"I-It's her life on the line! Of course I'm gonna get mad!"

"But Melly knows she messed up," Zara shot back. "And she said she was sorry. How can you yell at her like that?"

"Why're you acting like *I'm* the bad guy here?!?"

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

Captain Ludtink stood on the receiving end of a silent onslaught of pressure. I felt bad seeing him like that, so I stepped in.

"I appreciate you getting angry for my sake. It would be worse if you didn't say anything at all. So, um...thank you very much."

"As long as you understand," he replied bluntly.

He tried to slap me lightly on the shoulder...but of all things, he was a bit too strong. He ended up sending me flying forward and tumbling to the ground.

Fortunately, I landed safely on a patch of grass.

“Oh no, Melly!” Zara cried.

“That’s going too far, Captain!” Ulgus accused.

“Captain Ludtink,” the vice captain said angrily. “Medic Risurisu’s a woman. Don’t you *dare* hit her that hard!”

Garr lifted me back up on my feet. I started feeling guilty about being so weak compared to the rest of them.

But now, sadly, the others were demanding Captain Ludtink apologize to me too.

“...Um, Risurisu,” he finally said in a low voice. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s perfectly all right,” I said.

No one else appeared to be injured either, thankfully.

Captain Ludtink took the cow’s horns to bring home. Another unit was going to come back to recover or bury the bones.

“Are you okay, Melly?” Zara asked. “Can you get back on your horse?”

“I’m fine, yes.”

Just as I’d thought, the horses came running back when we whistled for them.

With that, the six of us returned to the city.



THE next day, the Second Expeditionary Squadron received a certain delivery. It was a thank-you gift from the hunting society.

Inside the box was an assortment of marbled cuts of three-horned cow beef. I saw the seal of a high-end butcher’s shop on the outside.

After what happened yesterday, I couldn’t help but let out an “Urk...” when I saw the meat. Ulgus peered into the box with the same reaction.

“Medic Risurisu,” he asked, “this isn’t the three-horned cow from yesterday, is it?”

“Of course not!” I hoped. “Meat must be allowed to unstiffen before it can be shipped. Most three-horned cow meat has to decompose for a week, at the

shortest, before being sold.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that,” he said.

“After large animals are slaughtered, rigor mortis sets in, and the meat gets too stiff to eat. That’s why you have to wait for decomposition before you ship it.”

“I see,” Ulgus said as he turned to Captain Ludtink. “What should we do with all this meat, Captain?”

“We’ll have to eat it all tonight, of course!” the captain said, grinning.

The box had a *lot* of beef. But given how many men we had to eat it, I knew we could probably finish it off.

Captain Ludtink left the meat preparations entirely up to Zara and me. But cooking all this meat would take a ton of work.

“We shouldn’t just grill it up and do nothing else with it,” Zara said decisively. “That’s so boring!”

I appreciated his opinion. But back home, I’d hardly ever eaten three-horned cow beef, so I had no clue how to prepare it.

“Melly,” Zara said happily as a thought came to him. “Let’s make Hamburg steaks!”

“Ham...burg?” I asked. I had never heard of it.

“Yeah!” Zara enthused. “You grind up the meat, add some minced veggies, roll it into a ball, and cook it.”

“So it’s like meatballs?”

“Well... Not really, no.”

Apparently, this recipe came from a different world.

“You know that restaurant with the weird animal on the sign? The cat with its paw up?” Zara asked. “The one so popular, there’s a line out the door every single day?”

“No, I don’t.”

He explained that they served recipes obtained from parallel worlds.

“They’re strange foods, but they’re absolutely delicious.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Like curry rice, which is simmered meat and veggies in a spicy sauce that they pour over these grains called ‘rice.’”

“*Kuree...rice...*”

“Then there’s sukiyaki, which is beef and vegetables simmered in a sweet broth.”

“Suki...yaki...”

“Let’s go there sometime when we’ve got a day off!” he suggested.

“Y-Yeah! Definitely!!”

With our future plans finalized, we got started on the meal.

Our workday was ending in an hour, so we were still on the clock. But Captain Ludtink had given us permission to cook, so it didn’t matter. *At least I hope...!*

Since we couldn’t work in the cafeteria while they were preparing for dinner, we had to use the Second Expedition’s small kitchen instead. Garr even agreed to build a brick oven outside for us while we prepped the meat once when we told him the simple indoor stove wouldn’t cut it.

“All right!” Zara said once we’d gotten everything set up in the kitchen. “Ready to get started?”

“Yes!”

Zara would chop the meat up until it was fully minced. My job was to handle the vegetables.

“First,” Zara said, “let’s cook up the veggies till they’re a nice golden brown.”

“Got it.”

I poured oil into a pan and began to simmer the diced vegetables.

Next, I filled a bowl with breadcrumbs, eggs, spices, salt, pepper, and milk. I mixed it all together, then added the simmered vegetables once they had

cooled down.

“And now the ground beef goes in next?” I asked.

“Exactly,” Zara said.

Isn't this just the same as meatballs? I wondered. *The only difference seems to be the simmered vegetables and the richer seasoning.*

“It’s best to let the meat sit and absorb the flavors,” Zara said. “But we don’t have a lot of time today, so we’ll have to skip that step.”

At Zara’s instruction, I took a piece of the meat mixture and rolled it up in my hand, making sure to flatten it against my palm to get the air out. *This is another step meatballs don’t have.*

“They’ll fall apart and all the juices will leak out if you don’t do it this way,” Zara explained.

“You sure know your stuff, Zara.”

“I studied up, since I wanted to eat it at home too.”

“I’ll bet you did!”

He then started to put cheese in the middle of the meat and rolled it all up once again.

“So there’s cheese in the patties too?” I asked.

“There sure is. Oh my gosh, the cheese is just so...”

“So...?”

“You’ll have to wait and see!” He winked at me.

Somehow, I felt like I knew exactly what he was talking about. We ended up making twenty patties in total. Zara hadn’t wanted to go through the work of cooking cut after cut of meat, which is why he’d minced it all and the two of us ended up with such a large number of patties.

Each Hamburg steak was the size of a man’s fist. I felt I would be full after eating just one.

We then took the raw patties outside and saw Garr was finished with the

brick oven. We placed an iron plate inside it to cook the steaks on.

“They’re plenty big and all,” Zara said. “But we’ll have to cook them underneath a cover at some point.”

“All right, then. I’ll head to the cafeteria and borrow a big lid,” I said.

The cafeteria had lots of big lids in their inventory. I knew I could find one large enough to cover our iron plate.

By the time I returned with one, I could already smell something delicious coming from the plaza.

“That’s perfect, Melly,” Zara said when he saw the lid.

“We’re steaming them now, right?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

The meat sizzled as it cooked. The smell alone was already making me ravenous.

Zara poured some expensive-looking liquor (probably some of Captain Ludtink’s) over the patties, causing the flames to roar up. He swiftly covered them with the lid.

After they had cooked for a while, he lifted the lid and then added tomato sauce and some more seasoning. After a few more minutes of cooking, the Hamburg steaks were done.

Captain Ludtink came outside when the end-of-the-day bell chimed.

“You’re done already?” he asked.

“We sure are,” Zara said. He confidently presented his work to the captain.

Once everyone was done with work, we served each of them a Hamburg steak.

There were no tables and chairs out here, so we sat like we did while on an expedition, our plates on top of our laps.

Each of us pressed our hands together and prayed. It was chilly outside, so we gathered around the warm oven to eat.

I sliced my steak with a knife.

“Wow, look at that!” I cried as soon as I cut it open and warm cheese and meat juices oozed out from the middle.

I stuck a large bite in my mouth. It was still piping hot, so I sucked in some air to cool it down.

The steak’s texture was nice and plump, with more juices seeping out as I chewed. While the entire steak was rich in flavor, the cheese helped balance it out tremendously. I could taste the sweetness of the vegetables and how they brought out the sauce’s flavor too.



I never knew such a delicious beef dish existed. It was an emotional experience.

I had been sure a single steak would fill me up, but I ended up gobbling down a second one too.

“These are so good!!” Ulgus declared. Clearly pleased, his eyes sparkled as he took bite after bite.

“...I want some booze,” Captain Ludtink muttered.

I didn’t feel like telling him the Hamburg steaks had alcohol in them already.

Vice Captain Velrey and Garr looked happy too. I was relieved to see their pleased expressions.

“I’ve actually never had a dish made of oven-roasted meatballs like this,” I said.

“Me neither!” Ulgus replied, sharing in the experience with me. “I had no clue it existed. I can’t believe I’ve been wasting the meatballs’ juices by eating them in soup all this time.”

“Well, I’m sure that just makes the soup taste more flavorful in the end,” I said.

While it was true that the Hamburg steak’s condensed umami flavor was incredible, I was also impressed by how unexpectedly delicious the cheese inside was too.

“I’d like to try ‘kuree rice’ as well sometime,” I said.

“What’s that, Medic Risurisu?!” Ulgus asked, excited.

“Apparently, it’s like a spicy sauce poured over some type of grain...”

“Is that actually any good?”

“It *sounded* good when Zara described it to me...” I said.

My lack of explanatory skills was embarrassing.

I didn’t know how to put it exactly, but I felt like cooking was a very deep subject. There were still so many methods and meals that I was encountering

for the very first time.

I hoped my family could try this Hamburg steak someday. Although it'd probably be hard for them to obtain three-horned cow meat. *I wonder if it tastes as good with chicken or rabbit...*

Next time I wrote them a letter about my life in the city, I would send along this recipe too.

Side Story: The Many Struggles of Ulgus the Knight

CAPTAIN Ludtink started off our morning meeting by ordering us to welcome a new member to our ranks. He said she was a medic.

It's about time we got one of those, I thought, filled with relief.

I closed my eyes, thinking about my time with this squad. It was nothing but one painful memory after another.



JUST three and a half months ago, Captain Ludtink had gotten into a huge fight with Medic Manon.

Ilgeze Manon was a first-tier medic, originally from the Fifteenth Expeditionary Squadron. I didn't get why such an amazing medic would come to *our* squadron, but his reasons soon became clear.

Medic Manon was old—in his late thirties—and though he acted nice and polite, he clearly thought himself much better than the rest of us. I shivered just remembering our time together.

It was in the little stuff he did, really: things like telling us what time to sleep while out on missions and to take turns between eating bread and jerky.

But the most frustrating things were when he ordered us to chew each bite of our food over fifty times to be extra healthy, to not eat any nuts we found on the job, and a million other little controlling nitpicks. He just generally butted into everything we did and scolded us.

I didn't know *how* Captain Ludtink put up with it. But I knew he respected Medic Manon since he was a high-ranking medic.

But one day, the captain just snapped...

It was on the fourth day of our mission. Medic Manon had told off Captain Ludtink who, exhausted from killing monsters for three days straight, had forgotten to shave that morning. Manon said his unkempt face was unbecoming

of a captain.

When Medic Manon handed him a brand-new razor, the captain just lost it and shouted at him. Captain Ludtink stopped shaving after that day. It made him look way scarier and older. But none of us felt like telling him to shave the beard off after that.

Eventually, he and the medic got into a huge argument over it, and Manon resigned from our squadron.

I was celebrating the shake-up until an unexpected consequence fell upon me: the captain ordered me to take on a medic's duties on top of my regular work!

Captain Ludtink eventually admitted to us that he'd gotten into a big fight with the personnel department over this, so we weren't gonna get anyone capable of replacing Medic Manon for a while.

The captain also said Medic Manon had started it all, since apparently, he'd been feeding the personnel department lies about the captain mixed in with the truth.

That was awful...not that the captain was off the hook for picking such immature fights! He wasn't someone people thought highly of to start with.

Captain Ludtink was born to a prestigious noble family and had been promoted to captain right away. Since knights were usually promoted based on seniority, this made a lot of people hate him, and he knew it. So as much as he'd tried to behave himself, his accumulating resentment toward Medic Manon eventually made him blow up over something simple.

But I digress...

After Manon had quit, the captain had ordered me to attend medic classes. When I took the exam, I managed to pass on my first try, though with just barely enough points to qualify as a third-tier medic.

Every day after that was exhausting.

When our next marching orders came in, I had to manage not only my own luggage but also all the medical tools and food prep. It was a nightmare!

And when I rushed to the food shed, I found it was totally empty. *Food was here a few days ago! Where'd it all go?*

I asked Captain Ludtink, who told me that Medic Manon had come back the other day to get his things. But he'd cleared out the whole food shed while he was at it!

But Medic Manon had left at least some of the provisions he made behind. He had diligently baked lots of healthy (read: extremely sour) bread and low-sodium (extremely hard) jerky for us.

With orders to get rations from the supply department, I sprinted off to get us some food.

The building was a five-minute run from the Second Expeditionary Squadron's barracks. The supply department existed to manage the knights' weapons, clothes, rations, and everything else we used on the job.

When I arrived with the written orders of our upcoming expedition, asking for a few days' worth of food, the staff member simply shook his head at me and said the Second Expeditionary Squadron received a food budget rather than rations, and as such, they couldn't provide us with the rations the rest of the squads received.

I cradled my head in my hands, wondering how the hell it'd come to this. But then I remembered something.

Medic Manon had said it was cheaper, more nutritious, and tastier to make the provisions on our own.

I never knew that homemade rations held such mysterious secrets. I just wished he hadn't thrown all the bread and jerky out before he left.

I reported back to Captain Ludtink, who ordered me to go buy any bread and jerky I could find in town, sending me off with some money.

Our expeditions back then were the worst of the worst. The bread I got from town would go moldy, and the jerky tasted funny.

Apparently, normal bread and jerky (the kind sold for snacks) wasn't made to keep very long, so they were terrible things to keep on us for rations on a

mission. Captain Ludtink had to hunt wild birds for us so we wouldn't starve. But those birds tasted absolutely disgusting too!

As soon as we got back, the captain raced to the supplies department, asking for us to start being allowed to take their rations instead of money. But they refused and said since our budget was already set, they couldn't alter it out of the blue like that.

That was how I ended up being ordered to make the rations myself. It was a conclusion that didn't make a lick of sense to me.

I headed to the library, researched the art of preserving foods, and came up with my own way of making things.

I sliced the bread up thin and let it dry. For the jerky, I baked it, boiled it, then dried it out. These turned out so disgusting, I writhed in agony.

But people can learn to handle even the worst tasting foods.

I was so grateful for how Vice Captain Velrey and Garr ate my rations without complaint. Captain Ludtink grumbled about the gross flavor, but he ate up every last bite. It was so nice of him, I actually teared up.

So yeah...every day with my added title of "combat medic" meant a constant barrage of work and misery.

That is until we were *fiinally* assigned a brand-new member.



I was absolutely positive that none of those prideful first-tier medics would want to join our squadron.

Rumor had it that Medic Manon had gotten on his last captain's bad side because he had such a huge ego; that was why he'd gotten passed off to our Second Expeditionary Squadron. I was sure he wouldn't do well in his next assignment either.

People always said our unit was the place people got sent after demotions.

Vice Captain Velrey used to be a bodyguard for the princess before Her Highness married a man from another kingdom and moved away, resulting in that unit being dissolved. Despite how strong she was, Vice Captain Velrey

wasn't promoted solely based on her gender. So she was forced to join us.

Zara Ahto, the man who worked as the main attraction at our favorite restaurant, used to work in Vice Captain Velrey's unit. But after it'd been dissolved, he'd retired.

Garr hardly ever spoke, which was why his old captain disliked him and had sent him off to us.

I used to be an imperial guard for the royal family. But once they'd learned I was born and raised on the streets, I got transferred to the Second Expeditionary Squadron too.

Apparently, imperial guards were supposed to come from good (aka, noble) families. It wasn't like I hid my origins or anything. But when they demoted me out of the blue, I was pretty confused. It was such a stupid rule!

But personally, I preferred the Second Expeditionary Squadron. I had a lot more freedom here than in an imperial guard unit, where I always had to be all rigid and composed.

Captain Ludtink had a sharp tongue, but he was a powerful fighter, and I respected him as a captain.

Vice-Captain Velrey was so reliable, like an older sister. Garr was blunt but still a nice guy.

Medic Manon was the one who'd spoiled the unit's mood. Everyone else was great!

Captain Ludtink had led the Second Expeditionary Squadron for about a year and a half now. This whole time, it was the combat medics that didn't fit in with us.

Medics were usually the brainy types in the first place. Vice Captain Velrey seemed to have given up, saying that we just couldn't get along with them.

I just prayed the new medic would be a nice person as I headed toward the personnel department.

I told the front desk that I was here to meet the Second Expeditionary Squadron's new combat medic and they led me to another room.

My heart raced in my chest as I walked. I was so damn nervous. This medic was going to be a major influence on all our future missions.

Please just don't be a stubborn jerk, I prayed over and over again in my head.

I knocked on the door before entering.

The new medic was seated in the dreary room, with no more than a couch and table inside it.

As soon as I laid eyes on her, I gasped in shock. *This has to be a mistake...*

She was so young! She couldn't be any older than fifteen or sixteen! When I stepped into the room, she looked up at me, surprised. A member of the personnel department introduced her to me while I stood in the entryway in a daze.



The new medic's name was Mell Risurisu.

They told me she'd earned the highest rank out of everyone who took the third-tier medic's exam. *But why is someone so smart joining us?* I couldn't help but be nervous. But the next thing they told me relieved my worries.

The girl—Medic Risurisu—was skilled at carrying out medical treatment too. But when it came to physical things like self-defense and luggage carrying, she was the lowest in her class.

Anyhow, it was clear she didn't get assigned to our unit because she had a temper. That alone was a relief. I awkwardly introduced myself before leading her to our barracks.

As we walked through the hall and out the door, I was still nervous. Most knights were men, so I'd never had the opportunity to talk to young girls at all. I didn't have the slightest clue about what might interest her.

Medic Risurisu was *tiny*. Her skin was so pale and her eyes were big and wide. She was actually very cute. I wondered why a girl who was at prime marrying age would join the Royal Order in the first place.

But then I remembered something about Fore Elves. *She might be able to use healing magic!*

But when I casually asked her about it, she responded in a deep, kinda sad tone, "I can't do that." I hadn't known that not all Fore Elves could use magic and I realized I probably shouldn't have even asked.

Neither of us said a single word until we reached the barracks.

Captain Ludtink, Vice-Captain Velrey, and Garr were all shocked when they laid eyes on her.

That was a perfectly natural reaction. Women who became knights only ever did so if they came from knight families, like Vice Captain Velrey, or because they were born with the right physique for it. We *never* had normal girls like Medic Risurisu among our ranks.

I couldn't ask her why she had joined us, but I was sure she had her reasons. Maybe someday, when we knew each other better, I'd be able to press her

about it.

My first impression of her was that she was very quiet and mature. But it turned out she was just shy.

Once she learned I was a year younger than her, she started talking to me like she was my big sister.

I liked that side of her a lot.

Despite my worries about how she'd do on expeditions, she always managed to keep up, no matter how tough the travel was for her.

She even cooked us delicious meals while we were out on missions!

She treated our injuries without any complaints too. And she knew a ton about medicinal herbs.

Medic Risurisu was a *wonderful* medic.

Captain Ludtink didn't seem to know how to interact with a normal girl like Medic Risurisu. I just hoped he wouldn't be too rough with her.

As time went on, Vice Captain Velrey started to smile a lot more. Maybe having been the only woman in our unit until now, she wanted someone she could be more open around. It was a nice change.

Garr's fur began looking much better since, apparently, Medic Risurisu started treating it with a special herbal ointment and brushing him down when she could.

It was the start of many big changes for the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

I just hoped Medic Risurisu would keep working alongside us. I felt that desire deep in my heart.

Side Story: Garr, the Wolfman Enigma

GARR was always a mystery to me, and I'd always been curious about him. So one day, I decided to ask him outright.

I felt very bad about this. But my village had a superstition that crossing paths with a wolfman—especially one with red hair—meant bad luck.

That was why I got goosebumps the very first time I saw his face when we met. I had assumed he'd be a violent, arrogant, selfish brute. But he had turned out to be quite the opposite: a kindhearted, gentle young man.

I couldn't help but wonder how he'd grown up to be so different from other wolfmen. I asked him about it and he said something completely unexpected.

Garr told me that, when he was just a boy, he had been adopted by a human couple in the capital, giving him a peaceful environment to grow up in.

"I-I see," I said in awe. "I didn't know that."

According to Garr, most wolfmen were raised in extremely unforgiving environments. Sometimes these were places like bogs or deserts that humans would never think to inhabit. That was what led to the tough demeanor most other wolfmen had.

In particular, red-furred wolfmen were native to volcanic areas. These environments were the harshest of all, and the wolfmen had to eat any and every living thing to survive—including people.

This tribe of red-furred wolfmen lived in another country far, far away from us. They weren't native to this kingdom.

So how exactly did Garr end up here? When I asked, with a sigh, he explained he had been captured by a slaver and brought here.

Twenty years ago, this country's noblemen were eager to purchase slaves of unusual races. It was the late king who'd finally put a stop to it.

In Garr's case, the mansion where he and the other slaves were being sold

was surrounded by knights who had swiftly arrested every last person involved. All the captives were returned to the lands they had been taken from.

But since Garr had been taken from a country that ours had no relationship with, they had no way to send him back and nowhere else to take him.

That was when one of the knights tasked with rescuing the slaves had put in a petition to adopt the young wolfboy.

“So...” I said after he’d finished telling me all this, “the knight who saved you became your father?”

Garr squinted his eyes and nodded.

His adoptive father, he’d said, was a solemn man whose feelings could be read from his body language, and his adoptive mother was a kind, gentle woman. Garr inherited these traits and grew into an adult who thought highly of his parents.

When I heard this story, I felt my respect for him skyrocket.

It was also a reminder of how important it was to cherish one’s family.



ON my next day off from work, I took a trip to the marketplace, eager to send my family something delicious, after hearing Garr’s tales of dedication to his own family.

But then I saw something shocking.

Garr was walking alongside a beautiful girl with chestnut-brown hair. The girl had her arm linked around his. *Don’t tell me! Is that his girlfriend?!*

I was a little curious...OKAY, a *lot* curious!

Following them around seemed like a bad idea, so I called out to him instead.

“Garr!”

We were still pretty far apart, but Garr’s ears were good enough to pick out my voice and he waved at me.

I ran up to him only to realize that the woman was glaring at me. *Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your date!* I silently apologized and decided to leave as

soon as was appropriate.

“Um, I’m Garr’s colleague, Mell Risurisu.” I emphasized the word “colleague” as much as possible.

Garr introduced the girl as Frederica Knore. She wasn’t his girlfriend, but a younger cousin on his adoptive mother’s side. Frederica had come to the capital to attend a ball.

Despite being unengaged, Frederica had refused to attend any social events, instead choosing to follow Garr around wherever he went. He sounded unusually troubled as he told me this.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Frederica had feelings for him, but I certainly wasn’t about to suggest that with her standing right there.

As I was about to let them go about their business, Frederica suddenly grabbed my shoulder.

“Would you care to have tea with me, Miss Risurisu?”

“Pardon?!”

Having tea with a young lady I had only just met, without Garr around...

My shy self couldn’t help but recoil at the thought. But before I could say anything, Frederica grabbed my hand and led me away. To my total dismay, Garr stayed in place as we got further and further away from him.



FREDERICA showed me...or rather, she dragged me to a fancy café with white walls. The interior was nice and quiet, and I could smell the aroma of roasting butter in the air.

“Please order whatever you like,” she said cheerfully.

“Th-Thank you...”

There was little chance I’d ever be in such a fancy café again, so I decided not to hold back with my order.

“Hmm...”

I was extremely curious about the baked good called “waffles.” They came in

so many varieties too! Chocolate, berry, caramel nut, and maple syrup...! Each type sounded delectable.

After much deliberation, I decided on caramel nut waffles with a healthy herb tea.

The waitress told me the café cooked each waffle individually, so I might have to wait thirty minutes for them. I wasn't super hungry, so I eagerly agreed to wait.

As soon as we'd finished ordering, Frederica piped up. "May I get right to the point?"

"Ah, of course!"

Her words snapped me back to reality, reminding me I was about to be interrogated. I couldn't imagine what she needed to ask me.

I knew I needed to earn my waffles by holding a conversation with her.

"Are you Garr's girlfriend?" she asked bluntly.

"No, I'm not!"

"Really?"

"Y-Yes! I swear on my waffles!" I said, blushing.

"What?"

"Ah! I mean...I swear to the gods that I'm not his girlfriend."

"O-Oh, I see..."

Her stiff face started to relax. She must've thought I was a love rival. *No wonder she was glaring at me!*

"I simply respect Garr as a person, squad member, and knight," I continued.

"What a relief..." She clutched her chest and sighed happily.

Still, I was surprised to meet a woman so passionate about Garr.

"Um, I'm sorry," she said abruptly. "I shouldn't have dragged you here if you didn't want to come."

"No, it's all right!"

It wasn't particularly expensive, but I would never have the courage to enter such a high-class café like this one alone. If anything, I was grateful she had dragged me here.

"I just couldn't help but wonder if you had feelings for Garr..." she went on.

"I know what you mean," I smiled. "Garr's a wonderful person."

"You think so too? Don't tell me! Does that mean—"

"No! No, it doesn't! I have no romantic feelings for him at all!"

"O-Oh. I did it again..." she said sadly.

"It's okay! Please don't worry so much."

My brain was currently occupied with waffles. She had nothing to get upset over!

"You see, I went to my aunt to ask if I could marry Garr..."

"Oh..."

Frederica was incredibly direct. I envied her courage.

"And what did she say?" I asked.

"That it was up to Garr..."

"I see..."

She explained that Garr's father was the son of an earl. But with two older brothers, he couldn't inherit the title. Frederica, on the other hand, was a viscount's daughter. Although Frederica was the fifth daughter of her household, their social standings were very different.

"My family isn't very wealthy," she explained. "So they don't demand much of who I marry..."

It sounds like they don't care about her husband being powerful and wealthy.

"Why's that?" I asked. I usually heard about noble families seeking marriages specifically to increase their fortunes.

"Because I'd need money to marry into a good family," she explained.

The requirements of marrying into a family meant having to take dresses,

accessories, furniture, horses, servants, and so much more along with you. Arriving with anything less than the finest quality of goods would make you a target for mockery.

“Father *really* struggled to get my oldest sister married off,” Frederica sighed.

“I-Is that right?”

Frederica explained they told her she could marry a man she loved—ideally, one who wouldn’t require much money.

“I debuted in high society two years ago, when I turned sixteen.”

Then when she’d come to the capital to live at her aunt’s house, she’d met the man of her dreams.

“I didn’t take a single servant with me! So as soon as I’d set foot in the capital, my bag was stolen right from under my nose. I left my bag on the ground for the briefest of moments to catch my breath. And when I looked down again, it was gone! But I got it back much sooner than I ever expected...” she sighed dreamily.

His knight’s cloak, she said, had fluttered in the breeze.

With his triangular ears, muscular body, and bright red tail, Garr suddenly stood there with the thief in his grasp. Another knight patrolling the area had arrived and formally took the criminal into custody.

“When he held my bag out for me,” she went on, her eyes getting a little misty as she talked, “he looked just like a prince! That was the moment...I fell in love with him.”

“I can definitely see the appeal.”

“Right?! That moment was the beginning of my love which has gone unanswered for the past two years. I tell him I love him every single day, and he still hardly responds at all...” she sighed.

“I think...” I said slowly, “I understand how Garr must feel.”

“You do?” she asked.

“Humans and wolfmen hardly ever wed, and there’s the issue of your status

as well...”

Garr was also adopted. So maybe he felt he wasn’t in the position to propose to her like that.

“Then what should I do?” Frederica asked, leaning forward to hear me.

“Hmm...”

It’s a difficult problem. The only resolution is...

“I think your only option is to *order* him to marry you, Miss Frederica.”

“Can I really do that?”

“I believe so. But that’s assuming that Garr has feelings for you too.”

Frederica took a moment to ponder my suggestion. It was then that my order finally arrived.

“Thank you for waiting,” our waitress said. “I have a caramel nut waffle and herb tea?”

“That’s me!” I chirped as a plate of freshly cooked waffles was set down right in front of me.

“Wow...!” I cried. It looked amazing!

Frederica had nothing but a cup of black tea. I offered her some of mine, but she said she was too overwhelmed to eat, so I had no choice but to enjoy the waffles on my own. I didn’t hesitate to dig in.

Waffles appeared to be flat pieces of bread with a grid shape on top. They were covered in caramel with a scattering of crushed nuts on top.

I cut into the waffle and found it nice and crisp. I dunked a piece into some caramel and nuts, then stuck it in my mouth.

The outside had crunch, but the inside was soft and dense. The waffle itself wasn’t very sweet. But the caramel sauce gave it more than enough flavor, only intensified by the fragrant nuts.

My healthy herb tea was the perfect drink for such a sweet dish. I alternated between taking bites of the waffle and sipping tea, and in no time at all, my snack was gone.

I concluded waffles were a delectable treat. Satisfied, I wiped my mouth clean.

Frederica still seemed to be pondering her dilemma.

I suggested we head out and the two of us went to the front to pay.

“Your order’s been paid for already,” the cashier said.

“Huh? But I didn’t—”

“Your husband, the wolfman, came by and paid just now.”

Garr! What a nice thing to do so casually!

Shockingly, Garr was outside waiting for us. He had guessed we would be here, since Frederica ate at this café a lot, and so he’d come to pick us up.

“Garr...” Frederica sighed.

The two stared at each other sweetly. I started to realize that I should probably just leave. But Garr had paid for my food, so I wanted to thank him at the very least. I just couldn’t find the right moment.

Should I leave now? Or wait a bit longer?

As I stood there, awkwardly waiting, Frederica took a step forward.

“...Garr, I want you to do something for me.”

Wait, don’t tell me...!

The right moment to leave was long gone.

“I...I order you to marry me!”

Frederica’s demand was a *lot* more forceful than either of us expected. Garr’s mouth hung open.

Then he shook his head from side to side, saying that there were many nice human men in high society that she could choose from.

“That’s not true,” Frederica said pleadingly.

“S-She’s right!” I said, stepping in, as pointless as it might be. “Have some more confidence, Garr!” I said firmly. “You’re a very appealing man, and you and Frederica make a nice couple!”

The two of them stared at me, totally dumbfounded.

I snapped out of it and was instantly mortified. *What am I doing?! I can't just stick my nose in others' affairs like this!*

"A-Anyway," I stuttered, "as long as you don't hate Miss Frederica, you shouldn't write her off like that! And if you *do* hate her, well...I think you should tell her here and now."

I didn't want to pressure Garr into agreeing to the marriage, so I offered him a way out too. But I really *did* feel like he loved her back. His expression had been so gentle when they'd been walking together earlier.

Okay, this is my cue to leave!

"Thank you for the waffles, Garr. I'll be on my way now!"

I took off at a sprint.

It was only after I had returned to my dorm room that I remembered *why* I'd gone out today—to buy things to send home to my family. *And all I did was eat waffles, stick my nose into Garr and Frederica's business, and come home empty-handed! What's wrong with me?!*

At least the waffles were delicious. I hoped I could take someone with me to eat them again next time.



THE next day, Garr asked me to meet him in the breakroom. When I arrived, he quietly told me what had happened after I left.

"Wait, really?!" I cried in shock.

Garr said that he and Frederica had become officially engaged. I was so very happy for them!

They didn't have a plan for the wedding yet. But at least they were finally on the same page.

"Congratulations! That's amazing!" I said.

Garr bowed his head and said my words were what encouraged him to accept her offer.

“It wasn’t all me!” I protested. “You were the one with the courage to go through with it in the end!”

I was so happy, and I told him I wished them the best of fortunes. Then I suddenly had a thought.

...Wait!

“Even though no one in my village would marry me,” I said, more to myself than to Garr, “maybe...just maybe...someone in this city is crazy enough to be my husband! Maybe, if I fell in love with someone...I could even be the one to pursue the marriage like Frederica did! If that happens, I hope to have your support, Garr!”

Despite all my crazy rambling, Garr simply smiled kindly and nodded his head.

Bonus Chapter: Expedition Cooking with Mell and Ulgus

“**HELLO** everyone! I’m Mell, the combat medic. This is my assistant, Ulgus.”

“Hey there, I’m June Ulgus! June’s my first name.”

“So Ulgus is your family name?”

“Correct!”

“Let’s put aside Ulgus’s life story and dive into today’s meal. We’ll be making a delicious, cured chicken to eat on expeditions.”

“Wow, Medic Risurisu! You can make cured chicken instead of cured ham?”

“You sure can! Chicken is lighter than pork, and it helps promote digestion and quicker recovery from fatigue. It’s a healthier kind of cured meat, that’s for sure. Let’s take a look at the ingredients. Chicken breast. Salt. Pepper. Sugar. And that’s it!”

“Such a simple recipe... That’s very convenient.”

“It certainly is! Let’s get straight to the cooking. First, place the chicken meat and other ingredients in a plastic bag and knead them together.”

“Excuse me, Medic Risurisu, what’s a ‘plastic bag’ exactly?”

“For those who may not know what that is, please use a sterile leather pouch instead.”

“...Huh?”

“L-Let’s get back to business. Once you’ve coated the chicken, let it rest in the refrigerator for a day.”

“Excuse me, Medic Risurisu. What’s a...‘refrigerator’?”

“Again, for those who may not know what that is, please let it rest in a cold room or underground cellar instead.”

“HUHHHHH?!?”

“When the chicken’s nice and rested the next day, wrap it up tight with saran wrap and make sure it’s closed up at both ends. For those of you who don’t have saran wrap at home, you can substitute a cotton cloth. Just don’t forget to sterilize it with boiling water first.”

“Of course! Thanks for explaining for those of us who might not know what, uh... ‘saran wrap’ is.”

“Of course. Finally, let it cook in a steamer until it’s ready to eat! Let’s dig in and see how it tastes. ...What do you think, Ulgus?”

“It’s nice and soft and tastes like the chicken’s flavor is condensed in each bite. It’s delicious!”

“That’s wonderful. By the way, this cured chicken doesn’t keep for very long! So keep it in your fridge and eat it as soon as possible!”

“But Medic Risurisu, if the cured chicken doesn’t keep, then we can’t bring it on expeditions in the first place! Ahahaha!”

Afterword

IT'S nice to meet you. I'm Mashimesa Emoto.

I would like to thank you very much for purchasing *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights!*

I typically write stories for women, so knowing that GC Novels was a male-marketed publisher, I worked on this book, constantly worrying about whether or not it would be received well.

I've been an avid reader of *Tanaka The Wizard Who's Never Had a Girlfriend* (this title isn't currently available in English) and *That Time I Got Reincarnated as a Slime* which GC Novels publishes, so I was extremely happy to receive the offer to publish this series with them.

This story originated from my desire to write a fantasy adventure with an elf girl protagonist. I hope you enjoyed reading about all the things Mell, the eighteen-year-old elf, pulled off with her hard work!

Stories about cooking are currently a huge trend in the light novel world, and *Enoch* is my way of throwing my hat in that ring.

These books usually follow protagonists who arrive in a parallel world and impress its inhabitants with their mind-blowing food. But my protagonist, Mell, is a native of this fantasy world who only cooks at a "pretty good" level.

There are only so many ingredients you can use when camping. It takes time and effort to make anything good out of that. But eating food when outdoors is still delicious, nonetheless. That's the main idea behind this book.

If I may, I'd like to explain about each character.

I intentionally wrote Mell to stray from the norms of elf characters. She's a poor girl who couldn't keep her fiancé in an elf village full of beautiful men and women. But she makes the most of her circumstances by using her new freedom to make a living in the city.

Captain Ludtink is an odd character—he's a nobleman but looks like a bandit on the outside. He's a dangerous thief-aristocrat mix.

Vice Captain Velrey is a tomboyish, taciturn, big sister figure. She's exactly the kind of woman I like.

Garr's a silent wolfman. Note how he doesn't have a single line during this whole story.

Ulgus is an outgoing young man with a boy's heart.

Zara's like a caring older sister...even though he would really be an older brother.

All the squadron members are written to be just as quirky as the protagonist herself.

I wrote about 100 extra pages for this story's novelization. When I first received my editor's request to add that much content, I thought, "They can't be serious, right...?" But they were.

I worked really, really hard. The new chapters contain lots of new content but are still centered around expeditions.

My editor gave me advice about things like the battle scenes, which taught me a lot about how to write them better in the future.

I used that advice for this story's online edition, resulting in my very first compliment from a reader who said, "I loved the battle scene!" It made me really happy.

Thank you so much for your help, editor!

I also received some absolutely charming illustrations drawn by Tera Akai-sensei for this book.

Mell, the protagonist, is supposed to be a very simple elf and the illustrations capture that perfectly while still portraying her as an adorable young lady. Her bag is so cute! I wish I could buy one for myself in real life.

Captain Ludtink really *does* look like a bandit. It's perfect; he even looks handsome after shaving his beard!

Akai-sensei really captured the tomboyish Vice Captain Velrey. Such lovely thighs!

Garr's so soft and fluffy. I thought he'd be the hardest to draw, but the illustrations make him look even cooler than I imagined.

Ulgus is really cute with his exposed forehead. I just love how he looks.

Zara's design is also even more lovely than I imagined. He truly looks like a beautiful woman and handsome man all in one. My editor and I discussed whether or not to give him a mole by his lips, and I'm glad we added it in the end. It's the perfect touch!

So, Akai-sensei, thank you again for your contribution!

If I'm able to release a second volume, I plan to show you thrilling twists, new members, mythical beasts, and even more adventures.

Please look forward to my future works!

I would also like to thank everyone who helped me get to the point of publishing this book. It's thanks to you that it turned out as well as it did.

Finally, I hope to see you all again someday. I'll be continuing to write from here on out.

Thank you very much for reading!



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